

PROFESSOR
**BERNICE
SUMMERFIELD**

A LIFE OF SURPRISES



A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY
EDITED BY PAUL CORNELL

BIG
PENGUIN



A Life of Surprises

A Short-Story Collection
edited by
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**BIG
FINISH**

Professor Bernice Summerfield, interstellar archaeologist, adventurer, romantic and drinker, has had either one very big life or a number of only slightly smaller ones.

This anthology contains stories from many times and places across her long career, ranging from the starkly dramatic, through the thrilling, to the hilarious.

It links Bernice to her roots, as well as sending her forward into new adventures. And it celebrates a decade of Bernice in print. Cheers!

Editor's Note:

These stories are taken from many different times in Bernice's life, or even lives. They're not in chronological order. In life and in books, it's often more fun to do it like that.

For Bernice Norman, the first of the many.

1: The Shape of the Hole

By Paul Cornell

She had left Jason to look after Peter, Keith and little Rebecca, because she had to make this journey on her own.

It always felt terrible when she left. Her husband-for-the-second-time and their children had been at her side permanently for the last few months, except for when she made these particular trips.

They had landed on this world following a tale that was told in an oral tradition, that had finally been written down in a book. A novel by an author who had grown up here. She had grown old and written about her childhood, and included the stories she had heard at her grandmother's knee.

That was always where he was. In the stories that were repeated because they brought warmth to the words of someone vulnerable.

Stories told by slaves and prisoners were often of him.

A year ago, she had set out to find him. The action of doing so, she had initially thought, would be enough. Her intent, her first questions, would send ripples that would reach him, and there he would be, at her shoulder when she deciphered something, or in a safe when she opened it, doffing his hat.

But he had not appeared. Her first questions had found only echoes. Her examinations of current affairs from all parts of the galaxy had found no figure that could very likely be him.

She had found Irving Braxiatel in the wine cellars of a monastery on Old Earth. He told her he had never had a brother, and that he no longer employed anyone that fitted the description of the figure she was seeking. He no longer employed anyone.

She had gone home to Jason and resolved to keep him and the children with her, then.

That was when she had despaired of him still existing. Her search for him became her search for his grave.

It took her a week to make her way through the jungle, sleeping alone under the canopy, only her diary for company. She thought a lot and wrote little.

The tale they told of him here was this: he had arrived among them with a great noise and scattering of birds. In those days, the jungle was smaller, and the people here were struggling to keep their lands. A regional government still existed, and it was draining the area's resources in order to support a war against a world government that was trying to save this planet from a runaway greenhouse effect. The

people here were waiting desperately for the world government to invade, would send messages to them by radio and accept relief packages dropped by their aircraft. But they were getting fewer and fewer as their jungle was torn down and their people arrested and shot.

He had bested their ritual storyteller and taken over as chief counsel to the King. He had turned their defensive position into an offensive one, had taken the force of trees and people into the regional capital and had grabbed the hand of the local 'President' in a handshake that became an arm wrestle. And all that time he had made jokes about 'the Scottish play'. He had opened the gates of the regional capital and let the tanks of what was now truly a world government in to cheering, welcoming crowds of grudging former enemies. There had been no reprisals, no atrocities. The reconciliation started immediately.

He stayed even then, working his way down into the rebels that arose from what remained of the concept of nationality. Joining them, leading them, leading them to discussion and dealing and cultural mixing.

He had been there in different years, at different crises, like an Arthur made flesh. His hand and glance appeared for five minutes here and there. And then, she was sure, there were others who were named as him who just took him as a model, who did things in his name. And some did terrible things in his name and those all came to terrible ends.

But everyone agreed that there was a point after which he no longer came, though they didn't agree at all as to when that was.

They all agreed there was a grave. They didn't know where.

That was the narrative the author told, with fondness at her people's old ways, joy at how they'd grown.

She found the joy on the seventh day: a small tumulus, overgrown, with flowers all over and the jungle come to reclaim it. There was no inscription, no words anywhere.

She looked at it with no hope, no fear.

She found the stone placed up against the entrance and rolled it away with a gravity beam.

'The grave was empty'.

She looked at the emptiness and felt something inside give way again. Relaxation and tension, again. She was starting to think that this was perhaps the lesson.

She had found his grave on Earth, on Olleril, on Artaris, on Kyrol, on Quiescia.

The grave was always empty.

She looked at the emptiness and felt something rise again. Because

now she'd got it. Now she knew.

The grave will always be empty.

2: Kill the Mouse!

By Daniel O'Mahony

Two nights ago, they shot a woman off my roof. I didn't see anything but I heard it. She took a bullet in the head and tumbled down into the alley. By the morning they'd taken the body, but she'd left an impression in the snow, her crushed arms spread like wings, her blood seeping into the white and making it pink. In the tenement, they're flying black rags from the cables, secret flags of mourning.

I can't say I'm bothered. I hate this planet. I want to go home.

I haven't brought you with me, diary dear. You're safe, away from prying eyes. I'll stitch this page into you when I get home. I'm only writing now because I need to distract myself. The whole expedition is washed out. I've been stuck in the work compound for the last six weeks. We've been trying to get out to the archaeological sites but the authority is blocking our every move. Braxiatel is due here today and he may be able to get something moving but I doubt it and I don't care. I want to leave before they decide we're too much bother to keep alive.

I think none of us are going to escape. Ganesh's gravity is higher than Earth-normal. Time slurs as I think and I sag in all the wrong places.

COMBINE was bad. Its sub-contractors are worse. There's nothing there – no spark in their hearts or their eyes – that I can see. They've completely crushed everything worth living for. This planet should be Christmas every day. The snow just falls and falls and never stops. It just seems to make things worse. It's freezing in my room. Every day I see the miserable contract-slaves of the Ganesh authority and my liberal conscience flutters into life. The old social misery picks me up no end because I can run away and they can't.

Let me tell you about Marco's boyfriend, James. The team are Brax's people not mine, but I know Marco and he's a good guy. He got out last week, when James was picked up for 'pederasty'. They both got out, expelled – the lucky sods – except that James had his face rearranged during seventeen hours in custody.

They wanted to make him ugly. They wanted to make him as ugly as they feel.

Richard, Gareth and skinny Kerry live upstairs, the last of my team. Good people, I'm sure, but careerists. I think the cold and the misery is affecting them too, judging from the noises I hear every night from the ceiling. I've taken to lying in bed wondering about the combinations – Kerry and Richard? Kerry and Gareth? Richard and Gareth? All three? You know me, I always get a bit frisky at Christmas, but the snows of

Ganesh have turned me off.

There's only one person I can talk to here and he's a spy. His name is Kint, he says he's a journalist and he always seems to be hanging round the same bar as me. He's either a snoop for COMBINE (and I persist in imagining that it might do some good here if it knew what was really going on) or one of its rivals. I don't know. He keeps feeding me lines that will draw me into the conspiracy and I keep ignoring them. Kint's sort of espionage isn't about cocktails, explosions and sex in the final reel; it's grubbing around in old box files in dingy hotel rooms. I've had enough of that already!

I tell a lie. There's someone else I can talk too, though she's only five. She's a little blonde chubby street-kid. I've offered her my room but she refused. She's actually got a warm little niche under one of the substations. She took me down there the other day and showed me the shrine she keeps.

He protects me, she said.

It's Ganesh, of course, a little statue of the elephant god. She must have stolen it from somewhere., poor kid. I hope she'll be okay when I've gone. I don't want to imagine her future, but she has a touching little faith in the statue she's set up.

'Ganesh is one of many gods. Back on Earth they used to have only one but when people went into space they needed the names of all the old gods they'd forgotten, to call the stars and planets.'

Monotheists were never going to rule the universe – not enough gods.

Weird. I've heard that theory before, but she must have come up with it all on her own. I wish I could take her with me. She stole matches from somewhere, and candles, and food, for the shrine. I've seen the way she cups the little flames to keep them alive.

She needs the warmth.

She has a cat, a big fat lazy tortoiseshell. It reminds me a lot of Wolsey only even more indolent, if that's possible. Out here animals are luxuries – a cat isn't just for Christmas, with a bit of ingenuity and Worcester sauce you can make it last till New Year. But my little girl seems to care for her pet. I miss Wolsey. I miss my cat.

Which reminds me. Somehow I managed to pack one of those catnip mice toys that drive Wolsey wild. What an odd thing to end up with! I dangled it by its tail in front of my face last night and I was so hungry I almost bit its head off.

The rebels?' Kint sneered. It didn't suit his face. 'What rebels? There are gangsters calling themselves freedom fighters. They're not going to make life better for anyone.'

'Maybe you're just cynical?' Bernice suggested.

'Maybe.' Kint hugged his pint. He'd been nursing the same drink for over an hour. So had Bernice. Alcohol was rare here and bitter. It was

hot in the tumbler, hot in her hands, sick in her stomach.

The bar with no name had a subterranean ambience. There was sawdust on the floorboards and paint smeared in random patches on the skeletal walls. Darkness radiating out of the single naked bulb overhead. Kint belonged here. He was in his element in this grubby hole in the ground.

I guess I am too.

Kint leaned back on his stool, not quite tipping it over. Benny sat hunched and alert and ready to move, but Kint was relaxed enough to stretch, sucking in the dirty atmosphere of the bar as though it was rare and tasty. He was a narrow Irishman, dark, sharp and amused.

Still, he reminded her of Brax. Moving, the resemblance vanished.

Brax wasn't so fleshy. And Brax didn't have such a sweet accent, more's the pity.

Brax wasn't there. He was due three hours ago. Benny was getting worried.

Every quarter of an hour a convoy rolled past the bar, rattling the structure and shaking loose slow clouds of dust on to Benny's pint and into her hair. There was an ache between her shoulders, the effect of Ganesh's gravity. And Beau still wasn't there. The dust had showered her thirteen times since she'd arrived and something was keeping Braxiatel from her.

What if they've imprisoned him?

What if they've killed him?

She'd asked Kint about the rebels and regretted it. He was *interesting*, full of cynical asides about Ganesh's politics, but he loved everything she hated about this grubby corporate world. If the authority was ever overthrown by benevolence he would probably pine away, starved of fascinating misery.

'Have you heard of Janus?'

Heavens, you'd almost think I was a qualified archaeologist.

'He's the Roman god of Thresholds. He watches over you when you're in a state of transition. Janus,' she hummed. 'Same root as Ganesh. Who was the same sort of god, if I remember rightly, though bigger on tusks and trunks and the whole *elephant* thing.'

Kint smiled benignly. If Benny weren't so tense, she'd feel patronised.

'Janus had two faces,' he said. 'If the people here needed a god they'd pray to him.'

'Have you met Braxiatel? He's an *irritating* git.'

She put the tumbler to her lips, tasting water and dust. Kint wanted to draw her down into his little world. She'd seen the angel smeared on the pavement, the effect of Ganesh's gravity on human bodies. She just wanted to escape and the one man who could get her out wasn't

here.

Benny saw them first, coming through the door in their great bulky coats of grey, their faces hidden under the smooth dome-helmets.

She'd heard the patrol lorry as it stopped right outside. Kint, not mistaking the sound of police footsteps, became quiet and still. Benny thought of something to say and let it die in her throat. There was a type of person in the universe who wouldn't let you crack wise or run rings round them, petty people with petty powers.

The corporate police drones looked like stormtroopers. They stood flanking the doorways, holding their rifles like clubs. Only the third policeman, the officer, came in, leaving a melting slick on the cellar steps. The door stayed open behind him and the cold wind blasted in and no one – least of all Benny – was going to complain.

The officer looked like he'd stepped out of an opera, his uniform a camp hymn to decorations and flourishes. There was a gun by his hip, half-hidden by all the braid. He might have looked good out of uniform, but ordinary, blandly handsome, featureless. As a policeman, no one would have to look at his face.

He's probably not turned twenty. You're just jealous.

'Professor Summerfeldt?'

Bernice nodded and made a yes-shape with her mouth.

She looked at his lips, wondering if that was supposed to be a smile. 'We need you to come to the hospital compound. It's your employer.'

Benny put down her drink, suddenly certain that it was the last alcohol she would ever taste. She looked into the captain's thoughtless eyes and knew that he was going to kill her.

Kint gave her an empathic smile as the officer walked her away but then he slumped away from her, resting his head on his hands as though they'd never met.

One thing registered as they drove her to her death, through the snow-packed thoroughfares of the worker's compound. Sitting with her in the high cab, the officer had pointed up through the windscreen. There were snow-clouds forming overhead, faint against the dusk and the roof-line of black tenement slabs.

'It's a new fall,' he said, wistfully. 'I love the snow. It's so blank.'

Bernice didn't answer but put her hands against the windscreen.

Solid glass. *He's hitting on you. Look at his grin.* She shivered. The clouds were just a premonition.

The hospital compound was another set of concrete silos, but well-lit and secure. The police frog-marched her through dim deserted corridors, the officer always behind her. Benny glanced sideways at an open door, catching a glimpse of a private ward, someone in bed, an orderly pushing the door to block her view. There was a strong scent of disinfectant on the air. *There would be, wouldn't there?*

The police opened a door for her. Calmly, she stepped through, thinking *this is it, the next thing is the bolt gun against my head, the metal spar punching into my brain, then nothing. If I'm lucky.* She flinched and they didn't kill her.

She blinked several times. They didn't mean to kill her.

The room was another private ward, a single bed for its sole patient. He was sitting upright by the bed, mewling to himself but forming no words. There were nurses. There was a doctor in his coat of white, a black rose growing from the caduceus on his lapel. She ignored them, concentrating on the patient, a man whose face would have seemed familiar if someone hadn't torn it off.

Torn was wrong. There was no sign of violence but the patient's face was gone. From missing ear to missing ear there was a pink sheen of blank flesh, eyeless and unfeatured. He looked like a child's puzzle, or an identikit picture before the features had been added.

Benny could still see ridges suggesting a brow, cheekbones, but there were only faint mounds where the eyes should have been, a gentle slope instead of a nose, a faint indentation instead of lips. Nothing remained of the patient's ears. He was smooth and unfinished, the skin unbroken, the skull flattened. She wondered how he was breathing. She looked at the incongruously neat comb of hair on the blank head and recognised him.

'*That's Braxiatel?*' The doctor and the officer were nodding, the same shill incomprehension in their eyes. Benny struggled for words:

'What happened to him?'

'We thought you might be able to tell us.'

Benny shook her head. She had another question, but it was best left unspoken. Of course he wasn't the only one. She'd seen too many closed doors, too many guards, to think he was unique. Instead she asked: 'Can he see me or hear me?'

'We don't think so.'

Bernice looked again at the ruin of Braxiatel's face. He wasn't in pain. He looked more embarrassed than anything else, as far as a faceless man could seem embarrassed. He was smooth and ridiculous.

It was terrible and she felt *concerned*... he was her *friend* and something *awful* had happened to him... and she would do *everything* she could to put it right... but it could wait.

Benny cupped hands over her face and snorted with laughter.

There was no room for Brax in the hospital, so they signed him over to Bernice in a three-hour ritual of paperwork. Halfway through she almost panicked, suddenly afraid not for herself but for Brax. *I shouldn't have laughed at him but he looked adorable and so helpless. I hurt myself giggling. It stopped being funny but I couldn't stop laughing. I*

was just happy to be alive – that we were both alive. Besides, he'd do the same for me and I'd forgive him, probably.

I'm too tired.

She would worry about Brax's missing face in the morning.

The captain offered her a lift home. She accepted, heard his name and forgot it instantly. He liked her, in a dispassionate conformist way. She felt numb in the cab next to him. She tried not to look too bored nor too cynical. She told him about how, as a child, she'd taken a handful of snow to fling at someone and found she'd picked up a lump of dog's mess with it. *Since then, I've never felt cold.* That was a lie and he'd seen her shivering enough to know it.

He turned off the engine three blocks from her digs and put a warm hand on her knee.

Benny snapped. 'Now look –' Then there was a *bang*, metal crumpling, from the bonnet of the cab. A shape rose up before them, blotting out the stars. It came forward. The windscreen broke inwards, glass fragments falling like rain.

The officer screamed. He kept the same perfect note as the shape took his shoulder and lifted him out through the screen, making a wider hole as he kicked and struggled. Bernice felt tiny itches on her face where the glass had grazed her. She was giggling, not certain that this was real, while outside the captain's screams jumped an octave and merged into the relentless wind.

Bernice climbed leisurely down the side of the cab to see what was going on.

The shape was hunched over the officer's writhing body, blurred silhouettes against the ice-glare. Benny's sole touched snow, crushed it. The shape whirled, hissed at her, its eyes glinting, its face lumpen and deformed.

Heavens, is that a trunk?!

Benny's eyes went to the officer and the shape chose that moment to pounce away, its cloak flickering behind it like a flare. Benny was already after it. The captain grabbed at her as she passed, shrieking furiously. She glanced down, saw his *lack-of-face* in the snow-light, the eyeless blank left by the elephant-shape. His screams were plaintive, fear not pain. Benny pushed him away and pelted after his attacker, her boots slipping in the long drifts, her lungs sucking in icy air and shredding. Somehow she kept steady and going, the shape constantly ahead of her but never quite vanishing.

It could get away if it wanted to.

That's not very reassuring.

The alleys were narrow canyons between the sheer black walls, narrow doors half-sunk into the street-sides. Benny turned a corner, thought she'd lost her quarry, felt a faint heat, saw the shape going

underground, half a street down.

Bernice paced slowly across to its door. It was probably cornered in there. She was on the outside in the bitter cold. If it was warmer she could have stayed out, waiting for the police, keeping it trapped all the while, but it was never going to be warm on Ganesh. The face-stealer was safe, goading her to come in or go home.

If it hadn't been for Brax, she would have gone home. Instead, she walked down into the monster's shrine.

There was only one room behind the door, another bare-board uniform adaptable *space*. You could take this room and make it a home, a bar, a prison or a lair. The occupant had done very little decoration but had filled the room with incense that made the walls – good solid concrete and offworld timber – seem distant and insubstantial. As she entered, Benny found herself pushing away strips dangling and flapping from the ceiling. She didn't look at them, but they brushed – leathery – against her hand and face. Underfoot there were scraps of meat and rotting vegetables, half-gnawed then scattered and she kept her eyes downwards in case she trod in something unmentionable. Strips of newspaper served as carpet and litter for the monster. The floor at least seemed real. Everything else belonged in another world.

There was a ring of candles in the centre of the room. Squatting listless in the heart of the candles was the shape, its long leathery cape tattered around it. The policeman's face dangled from its belt on a long fob-hook. Narrow insect fingers in metal gloves stroked at it, tickling the stolen flesh. The thief didn't have a trunk. It had a mask, an old-fashioned gas mask with glassy eyes and a long rubbery snout.

Bernice couldn't see a chink of human flesh under the costume.

Behind the mask, bulges and bumps suggested a cauliflower-shaped skull. Benny could see what it was meant to be.

She raised her hand. 'Salutation to Ganesh.'

Mask seethed, not wanting to speak.

ffi Not Ganesh ffi Janus ffi the chorus came from the rafters. Benny looked up and choked.

An orchard of stolen faces stared down at her out of the smoke.

They were dangling on hooks from the ceiling. Except there was no ceiling, just a well for the chains on which the flesh was hung and dried. A draught from the door set them flapping, jumping and breathing like Christmas chimes. They were pinned up there and they were all alive. The lowest, freshest ones danced in front of her. Some of them opened their mouths, yawning to show impossible teeth.

Others blinked and there were irises, corneas and eye-whites under the thin flesh. She recognised some of them – policemen, officials, accountants, managers, entrepreneurs, dealers, slavers, soldiers,

important and powerful faces stripped of their names and identities.

Their lips twitched as her gaze passed over them, some even spat.

When they spoke, there was one voice.

ffi Our name is Janus ffi

As the faces sang, Bernice looked back at the body in its holy circle, scratching its neck disinterestedly as the candles hissed and melted.

Its glass goggle eyes were turned on her. She doubted that she could do much to it here, in its place of power

‘I have a friend,’ she said simply. ‘His name was Irving Braxiatel. You took his face.’

She hadn’t spotted him among the gallows-faces, but suddenly it was there, stretched tender with a hook in each corner. The other faces were pallid, turning into deathmasks, but Brax’s still looked fresh and alive. It spoke alone, sounding just like him.

(Admittedly, only when he does that Vincent Price impression.)

ffi Our name is Janus and his face is mine. You can have none of them ffi

Benny thought about this for a minute, then said:

‘I’m not asking for anyone else. Just Brax.’

ffi He is one we were pulled down to deal with ffi

‘Look,’ Benny told the face sharply, ‘I *can* see the advantages to Brax not having a face but we’re leaving soon and he’s my *friend*. I don’t care about the others. Maybe they deserved it – maybe not. But Brax is my friend. And I want him back.’

Overhead the dangling faces giggled while Janus, in his circle, shuddered.

ffi And what will you give us for him? Your own face ffi

‘If you want,’ Benny replied, her stomach churning. It didn’t seem to hurt, she remembered, and there was probably an upside she couldn’t see.

Not that I’ll be able to see anything when...

ffi You? We don’t want you! You’re nobody ffi

Bernice shrugged.

ffi Give us what you can. Bring everything. Everything you can spare ffi

Brax quivered on his hooks. Even with Janus staring out through his eyes, he still had all his old familiar twitches, expressions.

Benny thought about what she might give up, then said:

‘Can I have twenty-four hours?’

Brax had been moved to her lodgings by the time she got back. He spent most of the next day sitting on her bed, burbling happily through his vanished mouth. She tried to feed him, offering him bowls then turning her back in the hope that he’d somehow manage to eat invisibly while she wasn’t looking. He didn’t.

What happens if this doesn't work? She could still take him home. The Collection could probably run just as well without him. But it wouldn't be the same. Besides, if he didn't – couldn't – eat, he'd end up starving to death. Benny's hope was that Janus just wanted to humiliate its victims, knew when to say *enough*. She spent most of her day packing – just what she'd expected to do really – while Brax sat on the edge of her bed, kicking his legs and not *looking* at her.

I've brought far too much junk with me. Good thing too.

She kept the clothes she stood up in and nothing else. The rest went in the bag: her spare and dirty clothes, her pens and her paper, a set of small archaeological tools, unopened packs of condoms, her impromptu diary, empty beer cans and a half-full Jack Daniels, a photo of her ex-husband with biro moustache, a photo of an old friend whose wedding she'd missed, a set of Russian dolls she'd bought as a souvenir on her first day on Ganesh, a black sock covered in cat hairs, a pair of earrings she'd liked when she was ten years younger, a tatty paperback copy of *Nights at the Circus* she'd brought to read on the flight there and back again, as much COMBINE currency as she could find, a discarded tube of skinny Kerry's skinny lipstick, a smaller bag and a small catnip-stuffed yellow-felt toy mouse.

She finished packing and waited for nightfall, for a curfew she knew she could break with impunity. Brax burred. When the time was right, she kissed him on the forehead – he was all forehead, pretty much – hefted the pack on her back and set out into the snow.

Flakes sprinkled across the ground, scattered by a furious wind. It was only a few minutes walk but she was almost snow-blind by the end of it. She huddled against it, wrapped in Brax's big black coat (*he won't mind losing it*), and colliding with several other bodies on her way to meet the god. She couldn't remember when she'd seen the compound this busy, not even during the day. The slaves of Ganesh were coming out of their homes into the night, where their breath showed up white and fine and misty.

I think I know what's going on. He was disguising his voice well but even so...

Janus had company when she arrived. The cellar room came with its own built-in natural darkness, but the choir of stolen faces hung low from the ceiling, the pale skins faintly luminous and enlightening.

Janus was still squatting on the wax-damp floor where she'd left him, while sitting cross-legged at his right hand was a little girl, blonde and chubby, with a shaggy tortoiseshell cat purring contentedly in her arms.

Benny nodded to her curtly. 'Your shrine's grown a bit,' she said.

'I thought it would if I prayed hard enough,' the girl replied, weak-voiced, shock maybe, or excitement. She didn't speak after that, but

craned her head to look curiously at Benny as she approached the living god.

ffi What have you brought us, Benny? ffi

‘Usually the monsters don’t call me Benny,’ she said evenly. ‘It’s always *Summerfield*. You know *Curse you Summerfield, we shall destroy you for this!* That sort of thing. What I wanted to ask was what it would take you to stop.’

ffi We would take the eggs from your womb, the skin off your body, the marrow from your bones, and it would not begin to satisfy ffi

Benny clapped sharply, cutting off the gloating shriek of the one-voice. Some of the faces looked sheepish and frightened.

‘That’s what monsters are *supposed* to speak like. You’re learning.

Good. She unshouldered her bag and tipped it over, the weight of its contents sliding to the lip and threatening to spill. ‘This is all I’ve got. Take It. Take it all.’

The bag bulged open and its contents cascaded across the floor at Janus’s feet. The cloaked body *buzzed* and hunched forward, its insect hands picking at the trinkets Benny had spilled around it. It plucked at everything in reach, inspecting them with assayer’s fingers. Then the gas mask-head came up, glass eyes reflecting not Benny, but Brax, blank-faced, suddenly regrowing his old features. Behind his head, empty hooks swung and jangled.

ffi Good enough ffi

I’ve won.

It would be a good idea to leave now.

Not yet.

‘Well,’ she said, offering her hand in friendship, ‘I’ve only met one entity I think was worthy of the title of God before and, as I can’t see any yellow dip, somehow I don’t think that particular epithet applies to you. Does It *Mister Kint?* !’

Her hand went round the gas mask’s snout. Before Janus could react, she tugged, wrenching the mask from his face. Then she stopped and took a little breath.

Janus wasn’t Kint. It wasn’t human. She wasn’t sure it was even *alien*. The face beneath the mask had gone wrong, crushed by its fall into this universe with its strange physics and poisonous chemistry.

Whatever it had tried to be, the body had gone wrong, growing diseased, deformed, sprouting spontaneous features – mouths and eyes and tongues –wherever it could.

Cacogen. That was the word.

Benny felt stupid for a few more seconds. Then she placed the mask gently on the floor at the god’s feet.

‘Right,’ she told it, ‘I’ll be off then.’

She walked steadily out on to the street. Then she made for the

safety of her digs, her feet leaving faint, shallow impressions in the snow.

You have a page missing now, diary dear, but I can rewrite you from memory.

Brax is normal again. I've told him what happened but all he remembers is a moment of breathlessness and tinnitus. And he has a craving for salted peanuts.

Shame I gave my last packet away to appease the god of transitions.

Kint, whom I slandered, is in hiding. He knows all about Janus and is terrified he'll be the next victim. I went to his digs and found him burning everything he owns.

'You don't know enough about these cacogens. They're not just aliens, they're actually something wrong with reality. That's all cacogen means – life that's wrong. They don't belong here. Jesus, Bernice, they're anti-life. And I know I'm next.'

He's trapped here. Brax has offered to pay his way but there's bad blood there and I don't want to pry. I don't care enough. Maybe I should start.

I'm going home. I've left the planet behind, and I think it's in a slightly better state than when I arrived. I'm not going to look back as I travel home to the Collection.

Salutation to Ganesh.

I saw her again, before I left. Not the cacogen, the little girl. She was sitting outside my digs, while in the street bewildered soldiers screamed and wept because they had no faces. The girl was smiling faintly and we spent some time talking. I won't write down what was said – something else I had to leave behind. But as I came out, I saw her playing with that catnip mouse. Her cat was stretched out on the wall next to her, completely still except for the odd twitch in his legs. My little girl was dangling the mouse by its tail, waving it like a hypnotist's charm over her pet's face.

'Come on.' she barked. 'Come on, Wolsey! Kill the mouse! Kill the mouse!'

Good name for a cat.

The last time I saw them, the cat was stirring. Its long arms went out, stiff and purposeful. It put its claws into the mouse and pulled it down into its mouth.

3: Solar Max and the Seven-Handed Snake-Mother

By Kate Orman

Over the door of the coffee-house rippled the seven-handed snake-mother in coils of thousand year old stone. The four explorers stood in the snow of Terra Roxa, gazing up at her.

‘Why has she only got six hands?’ said Thing One.

Only the doorway arch was made of the smoothly carved granite.

The building was a tube of baked brick, preserved for a millennium by a layer of frozen snow. The average Terra Roxan was a head and a half taller than Benny; she had to tilt her head back to take in the details of the snake-mother.

Thing One – whose real name was Pinkney, or Pinkerton or something – was right. The snake-mother was rearing up, six arms extending from her body, fingers opened wide like rays of starlight.

‘Where’s my seventh hand? Find it if you can,’ Benny said aloud.

Thing One and Thing Two looked unimpressed. Sarger the botanist said nothing.

After a day’s work cracking ice, they lit a fire in the centre of their tents, when three tries to get the electric stove to light had failed.

Benny brought out a miniature espresso maker, just a little jug with a narrow spout for the steam, and settled it into the embers. No batteries required.

‘Anyone else want a cuppa?’ she asked.

But the Things were already sneaking off into the ruins to have sex, and Sarger was snorting with derision. He had a broken nose, a thick chest and brush-cut grey hair. ‘How can you sit beneath that,’ he said, jerking a thumb at the sky, ‘and think of a drink to warm your stomach?’

The night sky was waving with light. A great streak of ice-blue radiance fell and condensed from the black, rippling like a dancer’s veil. It was beautiful enough to freeze your heart.

Terra Rosa was one of those tiny fringe colonies that had happened by accident. A small fleet of ships escaping the Pavo Abstinence had come across the Terra Roxan system, where their detectors had spotted a single ball of rock with breathable air. They stumbled to its southern magnetic pole and their ships had sunk exhausted into the snow.

They’d had to make do with whatever junk happened to be in the

ships. There was a patchwork fission plant only a few hundred kilometres from where Benny was standing, the thought of which made her stomach twitch. Electrical power lines ran out from that hub across the frozen landscape to a handful of towns, carried by wispy metal towers made from the ships' hulls. A row of the towers marched across the landscape towards al-Shadhili. Their buzzing voices carried over the landscape for kilometres. As the aurora swelled in the solar hurricane, those voices had been interrupted again and again, electrical power all over the planet disrupted by the massive flares.

Benny said, 'There's only so much cosmic magnificence you can take in at one go. You need little things too.'

'Little things,' repeated Saeger. 'Forgotten the next day.' His gaze wandered off her, his interest already lost.

'Human beings are about halfway between the biggest and the smallest things in the universe,' said Benny loudly. 'Halfway between the shortest-lived and the longest-lived. Perhaps we would look vast and all-important to an atom.' She stopped herself before she slid completely into her lecturing voice. 'Anyway, we need things on our own scale to keep us sane.'

She had hoped for a debate, but Sarger wasn't listening. Benny shrugged and took her little metal cup of espresso off the fire. Give him the benefit of the doubt – maybe he just didn't know how to talk to someone who didn't have external genitalia.

A century ago, every woman on Sarger's homeworld had been killed by a biological weapon developed by the Abstergence. Nothing human and female could survive there for more than a few weeks.

Twice a year, Sarger's people imported a boatload of women from a desperately poor neighbouring colony for a week's worth of fun and babymaking. They kept the boys.

Sarger had been offworld before on botanical surveys, but always accompanied by other men. Benny was the first woman he'd ever had to work alongside. He was at least as uncomfortable as she was: they'd both expected to be part of a large mixed group. Now here they were, stuck on either side of a campfire, sitting about as far apart as they could get without risking frostbite, and he was making fun of her espresso maker.

The coffee was going down sparkling hot. 'Your scars, for instance,' said Benny, determined to get a response. 'You keep your sleeves rolled up to the elbow even in this cold.' His bare forearms were doodled with the red and white lines of cuts deep and shallow.

'Compared to the fall of empires or the death of stars, aren't they just as small and insignificant as my coffee?'

Sarger stood up, fists clenching at the ends of those painted forearms. Benny refused to react, taking another small mouthful, but

she kept her eyes on him.

‘Each one of these scars marks an event, a fight. Any one of those events might have been the end of my life.’ He stabbed a finger at a particularly vicious cut. ‘These are the things that are remembered. The things that count. Not your trivial comforts.’

It would have been a lot easier to dismiss Sarger as a caveman if he wasn’t a genius. He wasn’t saying much, but she knew that in a single day he had catalogued almost a hundred native species in his search for the legendary *igo* plant. Benny said gently, ‘I’m glad you’re still here, then. This expedition would be pretty much pointless without you.’

Sarger didn’t seem to know what to do with himself. He finally wandered off to the scarlet tube of his tent. Benny raised her cup to the snake-mother in the sky and drained the last of her coffee.

The next morning Benny set the Things to work using the Lifter. There was a courtyard next to the coffee-house, buried in dirt and modern garbage and covered in a fat layer of snow. Their job was to uncover the original tiles without damaging them. The Lifter, a fat metal spider you sat in, would do the physical work. Thankfully, it would do much of the thinking as well, gauging the right amount of pressure to use for every scoopful and keeping an eye out for anything buried in the muck which might be interesting.

Thing One and Thing Two were Benny’s unspoken nicknames for the pair of surly Terra Roxan students she’d been obliged to drag along on this expedition. Everything had gone wrong from the beginning: there should have been no less than thirty students, led by a team of five tip-top archaeologists, all focused on studying the Terra Roxans’ extinct coffee culture. And they all should have been here three months ago, in the summer, well before solar max.

Instead, funding had been cut, delays had meant the rest of the team had to get back to studies or other projects, and she’d been stuck here with a pair of Things from the nearby tiny town of al-Shadhili.

And with Sarger E!xhares from the Planet of Men. Right in time for one of the worst solar maximums in Terra Roxan history, bad enough to overload the generators in their equipment even with the standard shielding. The radios were a lost cause. They’d improvised extra shielding for the Lifter, enough to get it to work on low power.

She looked around. Sarger was examining some of the huddled shrubs, knocking the snow from their delicate leaves with his oversized hands. He was the best ethnobotanist in the twelve local systems, the best candidate to rediscover the *igo* plant and earn himself a bunch of academic prize money.

One of the fleeing ships, for forgotten reasons, had been carrying a

ton of coffee seeds. Planted in the cold alien soil, something had happened to them. The coffee beans were normal, but some substance in the icy skin of Terra Roxan had infected the leaves, producing a savage hallucinogen the locals called *igo*. They'd got so addicted to drinking *igo* that their already borderline civilisation had almost collapsed. Five hundred years ago they banned the stuff and buried the crop. Now the Terra Roxans sat in their Antarctic towns under flickering electric lights and drank tea. No one even remembered what the mutated plant looked like.

The aurora was the snake-mother herself, according to the Terra Roxan's caffeine-fired spirituality. She was normally only visible at night. Now, with the solar maximum approaching, the snake-mother burned across the sky even at noon.

Sarger got to work rummaging through the snow for live plants and midden heaps, ignoring everyone else. He didn't seem particularly angry after last night. Benny supposed that what she said just didn't mean that much to him. All he was interested in was finding that *igo* plant.

The Things started having trouble with the Lifter as noon approached. They stood around smoking and arguing and glancing nervously at the sky. The boy and girl were as tall and slender as the electrical towers, grown like sunflowers in the low gravity. They vanished inside their thick yale-fur coats. Neither of them was all that interested in their planet's short and unhappy history, but they needed the line on their curricula vitae in order to get off the dirty snowball and into a university elsewhere.

They'd have to learn for themselves about the hitches and hassles of a dig. Benny checked on Sarger – he was snipping samples from a bush about twenty metres away – and watched the aurora for a few hypnotic minutes. If anything, it was getting brighter as more and more particles from the paroxysming sun ripped into the ionosphere.

'Hey Professor Summerfield,' called Thing Two, whose real name was Jade. Benny stretched her stiff back and neck and walked over to her reluctant students. They were crouched over the section of courtyard they'd managed to clear before the Lifter began its protesting pattern of fits and starts.

'The tiles are loose,' said Thing One, as Benny crouched down beside them. 'Did we damage it?'

'I think it's supposed to be like that.' Thing Two reached down for one of the wide, baked brick tiles. She glanced at Benny, who gave her a nod.

Gingerly, Thing Two got her fingernails under the tile, then her fingertips, and then she was pulling the whole thing away from the ground. Underneath, where there should have been iron-hard frozen

earth, there was a criss-cross of thick metal rods and wooden beams.

‘Oh fantastic,’ said Thing Two, and she meant it. ‘Look at this.’

Beneath the metal grating was a whole second coffee-house, hidden under the frozen ground. Benny’s torch lit up for long enough to show the details: chairs, long benches and tables. And shelves.

Bookshelves. With what looked like printed and bound books.

Benny decided she was seriously less pissed-off about the Things.

‘All right, you two,’ she said. ‘See how many of these tiles you can uncover and get up using the Lifter. See if we can find a way of getting down there. Can we get a rope ladder between those beams?’

The Things grinned and got back to work.

Two hours later, the disaster happened.

Thing One was prying up tiles and stacking them carefully at the side of the courtyard. Thing Two was operating the Lifter about two metres away, sitting in the middle of the yellow-and-black spider, clearing off snow and soil to reveal more of the tiles.

The Lifter jammed just as Thing Two was swinging a load of snow out of the way. The Lifter’s limb, which should have been locked by the onboard safety systems, kept on swinging, twisting as it went.

Benny and Thing One started to run towards the Lifter. But Benny wasn’t running for the machine. She grabbed Thing One just as the heavy club of the Lifter’s limb would have smacked through his head without stopping. Thing Two’s involuntary squeal of fright became a raw scream as the Lifter collapsed on to its side, crushing its own limbs beneath its yellow body. There was a final crashing sound as part of the vehicle’s body collapsed, and then silence.

Not quite silence. Benny could hear Thing Two whimpering inside the wrecked Lifter. She dropped the struggling Thing One and ran for the shattered machine.

‘I’m all right!’ screamed Jade. The Lifter had tipped over so far that she was lying sideways in the snow, her legs still inside the shallow cabin up to her knees.

‘Relax,’ said Benny, crouching down beside her ‘The excitement’s all over. Now we’re going to get you out of there.’

‘Oh man,’ said Thing One. ‘The Lifter is crukked.’

‘Never mind that,’ said Benny. ‘Th – er, Jade, can you wiggle out of there?’

Jade let out another scream. ‘I’m caught!’ she said. ‘I can’t feel my feet!’

Sarger said, ‘The radio isn’t working. I can’t contact al-Shadhili.’

Benny almost jumped at the sound of his voice.

She took hold of Thing Two’s shoulders and tried gently tugging on her. Thing Two just sobbed as her legs came free of the wreckage.

She made a lot more noise when Benny checked for fractures. ‘No

problems,' said Benny, with her best air of brisk confidence. 'We're going to splint you up, then take you into town.' She grinned reassuringly. 'Guess what – you just got out of school.' Thing Two didn't smile.

Inevitably, the damn buggy wouldn't start. They'd have to drag her into town. It was just past lunchtime, and the aurora was almost too bright to look at. Thing Two squinted at the sky as they loaded her on to the sledge, her legs buried in boots of inflatable splint foam.

'Listen, Professor Summerfield,' said Thing One, 'I should take her. You guys should stay here and keep on working.'

Benny and Sarger glanced at one another without making eye contact. 'I'm responsible for you two,' said Benny. 'None of the radios are working. What if something happens?'

'We're not children,' protested Thing Two.

Thing One said, 'I've got plenty of distress flares. If we got stuck, you'd see one or town would see one.'

'And the yales?' said Benny. 'You two would be about one mouthful each.'

Thing One shouldered his percussion rifle. 'We grew up here, remember?'

Sarger said, 'This child is right.' They all looked at him. Before Thing One could protest, Sarger said, 'We must stop soon. This expedition is a failure.'

Benny blew out a sigh. One more question. 'Are you sure things will be safe back in al-Shadhili?' She pointed upwards.

Thing One said, 'Last time it happened was just before I was born. My dad says it was no big deal. The power goes out, but it's not the end of the world.'

'The whole thing is a complete cruk-up,' whispered Thing Two.

Her voice was hoarse and woozy with the sedatives Benny had given her. 'It's never been like this. You can't even look at it. We should all go. We should all go home.'

This was the point at which Benny, chewing her lip as she looked back at that tantalising underground library, made a very bad decision.

'One more night,' she said. 'We'll do a quick survey this afternoon, finish off tomorrow morning, and be out of here by lunchtime. We'll meet up with you back in al-Shadhili.'

No one objected. 'All right,' said Benny, clapping her hands. Was the boy's name Pinkney or Pinkerton? 'You two get moving,' she said lamely. 'We'll do everything we can here, and we'll see you tomorrow.'

Benny spent the afternoon packaging and partly translating the

collection of books and documents housed in the underground rooms. She was deep in an inventory when she realised Sarger was standing at the top of the hole, looking down at her.

‘This ought to interest you,’ she called out. ‘It’s a sort of shopping list.’

Sarger leapt down into the underground chamber, landing with an athletic grace which worried her.

‘I think I know who lived down here,’ she said, handing him the paper. ‘The expert farmers who cultivated the *igo*. They weren’t allowed to leave the coffee-house’s land. Not much better than slaves. The strange thing is that none of the books are about agriculture, or botany. I’m starting to suspect it was forbidden to record any information about the sacred plants.’

Sarger said, ‘Do any of these books concern politics?’

Surprised, Benny said, ‘I think so, yes.’ She tapped her finger on one of the covers, and Sarger picked up the book. ‘I know coffee-houses have always been places for political discussion, but I can’t see anyone coming up with a coherent sentence on *igo*, let alone a manifesto.’

‘The drug opened key centres in the brain,’ Sarger explained, seeming pleased there was a subject they could talk about. ‘The Terra Roxans made decisions communally under its influence.’

‘None of this was in the literature,’ said Benny, intrigued.

‘I am making a private study,’ said Sarger. ‘I am almost ready to publish.’

‘And the *igo* plant itself?’ she asked. ‘Have you identified that?’

‘I am almost certain.’

Benny nodded. ‘We’ll get everything covered up, and come back for the rest of the books after solar max has passed.’ She sighed. ‘I’m afraid Jade is right. This expedition is crukked. We’ll have to try again next year.’

As she turned back to pick up another of the books, Sarger slapped her on the rump.

She’d been waiting for that. She turned in a smooth arc and punched him in the shoulder, hard, her hand curled into a two-knuckled fist. There was no way the blow would injure him, but it would hurt like billy-o.

Sarger took a step backwards, rubbing at the bright star of pain.

His face curled into a wrathful mask. ‘You little bleeder!’ he snarled.

But his face was red, not white: basic body language told her that was unfocused anger, not readiness to attack.

‘You hate to be touched, you bleeding hater of sex,’ he muttered.

But he didn’t try it again.

Sarger lit a fire. It was going to be a bloody cold night without the

tent heaters, but at least they could eat something warm first. Benny decided it might be a good idea not to bring out the espresso maker

‘Incense,’ said Benny. Curls of pinkish smoke wriggled up from the fire, carrying a rich smell of arabica and... she couldn’t put her finger on it. Bergamot? Coconut? She had seen an illustration in one of the books: *igo* drinkers, sitting around a bowl of what looked like joss sticks, their heads wreathed in aromatic smoke. It eased the bitterness of the coffee, the burning-rubber flavour of the *igo*.

They had spent the rest of the last day in separate silence, Sarger bagging his plant samples, Benny sorting and packing the books.

They both loaded insulated metal containers with their goodies, ready to be picked up on the return expedition.

Benny tried repeatedly to contact al-Shadhili, but the radio seemed to be entirely *verklemt*. Nothing but static, the hissing of the snake-mother. Tonight She was hot green, falling in curtains with a reddish fringe. Benny tried the radio, just for the heck of it, as she settled down in front of the fire with a mug of soup. Nothing. She felt a pressure in her brain, as though the static was penetrating her skull, as though she could hear the snake-mother’s voice without the benefit of technology.

Sarger glanced at her, as if to acknowledge the radio contact problem, and then went back to the stuff he was eating – some of the native plants he’d been collecting, cooked with what looked like potatoes and onion. It was strange, watching him patiently puree the stuff with a little whisk. He didn’t offer her a taste, and Benny didn’t ask.

She flinched, thinking of the Things. Pinkney was right – they were born and bred to this place, a couple of hour’s drag across the snow was nothing to them. She should have gone with them anyway. There really wasn’t any excuse for sending off her students like that, unsupervised, however exciting the dig might have suddenly become.

And staying on her own with Sarger hadn’t exactly been a stroke of genius, either.

The aurora seemed to flare, bright enough for a moment that the snow lit up with green shadows. Somewhere nearby, a yale let out a screeching yell. Benny almost dropped her soup. It was the first time she had heard the sound in real life: documentaries and tourist info about Terra Roxa were full of footage of the tall, skeletal carnivores, but they seldom came close to the towns. The cry sounded like metal tearing under stress.

Benny stood up. ‘I don’t like that even slightly,’ she said. ‘Look, we’ve got some chemical lamps – I’m going to break them open and ring the camp. The flames should keep the baying at bay.’

Sarger didn’t respond: he seemed far more interested in the fire than

in her.

Benny shrugged and went to the supplies sled to fetch the lamps.

Crunching over the snow, she hugged herself. She was actually trembling a little with cold. Or maybe those dreadful screeches were getting to her. She bumped into one of the yales as she laid down the first of the chemical lamps.

The alien carnivore loomed up over a rise of snow. It looked like a greyhound that had been stretched until it was tall as a horse. Its face was something like a dog's head, without ears, and without – without – it did have a mouth. It had a bony sucking hole at the front of its head which looked like the intake of a jet engine. It didn't bite, it couldn't.

What did it do to you?

She hefted the rifle off her back, and promptly dropped it in the snow. She was shaking so much now that she could barely grip the thing as she brought it up. It seemed to explode in her grip, sending her stumbling back until she sat down in a snowdrift.

She had fired the gun. Some part of her nervous system remembered how to do it. The yale wasn't injured, her shot could have gone off in any direction, but it had leapt back, startled as hell.

Whatever automatic procedure had fired the gun was failing to tell her how to reload it. Come on, she'd been great at the training! Her fingers skittered over the cold metal surface, feeling lumps and bumps. God, God, God, what did you do?

The yale's head shot forward, its sucker-mouth-hole stabbing at her. Benny screamed and swatted uselessly at it with the point of the gun.

Sarger loomed in her vision, his own rifle held over his head like a club. He smashed it down on the yale's pointed head. The barrel cracked with a dreadful crunch. No, the yale's skull broke. The monster expelled a scream, right in her face, foul air rushing hard out of its circular orifice and into her eyes.

It sneezed blood on to her and expired, toppling like a tower made of matches into the snow.

Benny got up. The shaking had subsided. Everything seemed sharp and clear now, the snow glowing green-hot under the carcass of the yale. Sarger was knocking bits of brain off the butt of his rifle, not looking at her.

'You saved my life,' Benny said. 'Thank you.'

He turned and casually aimed a head-ringing slap at her face.

She caught his hand before the blow landed. In the moment when they looked into one another's eyes, Benny realised an ugly fact: as far as Sarger was concerned, she was his now. He had the right to injure her, and only him.

Benny ran across the snow, light as a feather, hard as ice.

Sarger was somewhere behind her. She had given him the slip as they'd walked back to the camp, and bolted into the ruins. What she really wanted was a maze of tunnels, but all she had was a few tents and a single long hall. The landscape was flat, nowhere to hide.

It didn't matter. She could run to the horizon, or hitch a ride on the aurora. Sarger could never catch her.

She ran through the hall, through the ghost of the *igo* smokers, crowded around miniature cauldrons. Not for these high decision makers the lowly *igo* drink and its marshy stink. They were mainlining the snake-mother, cutting the hard stench of the leaves with the sweetness of incense. Putting their fates in Her seven hands.

Benny shot out of the other end of the hall and flew across the snow under sheets of green fire. On the horizon she could see hot lights, towns burning. Explosions carried across the still landscape.

The snake-mother gave a flick of Her coils, and a world fell apart like a biscuit dipped in coffee.

She rolled, and galaxies collided, vomiting out their lives in radioactive fireworks.

She brushed empires from Her scales like specks of grit.

No perfume could take the blood off Her claws.

But underneath all that – underneath the surface details – there was really – Benny rolled in the snow. Sarger was coming over a rise, hefting the rifle.

The *igo* was the snake-mother's seventh hand. There was a hole in the palm of Her hand, a hole you looked through into other worlds.

The smokers saw the past and the future, all the rising and falling, all the clinging and slipping.

'You put it in the fire!' she shouted. 'Everything's in the fire now!'

'Shut up,' Sarger told her. He stabbed down at her with the butt of the rifle, but she writhed out of the way, feeling her skin loosening around her.

'You've poisoned us both!'

'This is what I came for,' said Sarger. His eyes were like skull-holes.

'You didn't come here to rape me, you madman! You're an archaeologist! A scientist! Like me! Try to remember who you are!'

'I'm not here for you,' he said, with a laugh in his voice. 'I'm here for Her.' He jerked a thumb at the snake-mother in the sky. 'I want to find out what's underneath it all.'

The world was tearing away beneath them, revealing its vast and true face. Hold on, she told herself! Hold on to books! Hold on to baths! Hold on to friends! Hold on to gardens! Hold on to tea cake!

Hold on to history! Hold on to humanity!

'There's nothing underneath!' Benny screamed at him. 'There's only

Her! Her!’

She gave one more desperate twist, and her skin came off in a single, baggy shrug, freezing solid to the snow as she dragged herself out of it.

She climbed to her feet, eight limbs curving in the snow light.

She held up her hands. Sarger saw the holes in them and screamed, screamed louder and harder than the yale had. He ran away, his own hands fluttering in front of his face, trying to keep out the green light.

She watched him until she couldn’t see him anymore.

In the morning Benny stumbled the last metres into the town of al-Shadhili. The electric towers were silent. All across the planet, they were silent, killed by the worst solar storm in the planet’s brief history.

The town had only ever been a dozen wooden houses. Now it wasn’t even that. It was as ruined as she felt after the heavy dose of *igo* she had inhaled thanks to Sarger’s experiment. With the expedition ruined, it had been a quick and dirty way to check he had the right plant.

Half the buildings had burnt down in the night. There were vehicles abandoned in the streets, one lying on its side. The people had all fled, God knew where. Where did you run when the end of the world came?

Benny stumbled through the wreckage, her nostrils full of damp smoke, looking for the medical centre where she had sent her students. It was a heap of ashes and half-melted slag. She could see fragments of bone sticking out of the burnt rubble like broken twigs.

There was no way to know if Jade and Pinkney had been in there, or if they had been able to escape out on to the empty plains. She supposed Sarger was out there somewhere, still cowering from the aurora.

She had seen this before, dozens of times, on dozens of worlds.

The shells of houses, the objects left behind by the fled and the dead.

Usually she had to dig for that moment, uncovering the death of a family, a town, a world. It wasn’t often she got to be on the spot when it happened.

What she really wanted to do was find a quiet corner in the snow, lie down, and let the cold seep in.

Benny sat down and built a fire in the shelter of one of the surviving houses. Hunched over the low flames, she took the espresso maker out of her backpack and slipped it on to the embers. From a little distance, a child came out of a building and watched her making coffee in the ashes.

4: A Mutual Friend

By Terrance Dicks

Bernice Summerfield, badly hung over and desperate for coffee, collected her mug of double espresso from the Starbucks counter and looked round for somewhere to sit before she fell over.

Starbucks were the same the galaxy over, it seemed. Even in her time.

The café was full. Not an empty table. She looked round for a table to share. Ignoring the welcoming smiles of a number of hopeful young men – nice to know she still had it though – she chose a window table, where an attractive dark-haired woman sat alone, scribbling into a notebook.

‘All right if I sit here? I can see you’re working, I promise not to chatter.’

The woman looked up, smiled and nodded, and went back to her notebook. Thankfully, Benny sat down. She took a swig of coffee, followed it with another, and began to think she might live. She drained her mug and looked up to see the woman smiling at her. It was a nice smile.

‘You look as if you needed that.’

Benny nodded. ‘I’ll say. And I need another.’ She saw the woman’s glass mug was empty. ‘Let me get you something.’

The woman hesitated then said, ‘Thank you. Lemon tea please.’

Benny made her way to the counter, got served and carried the cups back to the table. She sat down and passed over the lemon tea.

‘Thank you.’ The woman raised her glass. ‘Cheers!’

Benny shuddered. ‘Don’t say that. It was too many “Cheers!” last night that reduced me to this state.’

‘I promise not to chatter too, if you’re in need of peace and quiet,’ said the woman solemnly.

Benny grinned. ‘That’s all right, I’m starting to come round.’

She took another swig of coffee, thinking of the night before.

Bored and restless, not an uncommon state for her, she’d persuaded Jason to dig out his time ring and together they’d come back to twenty-first century Earth. Things had changed – for one thing, the pubs were open all day now. Jason had sodded off to buy a complete set of Britney Spears CDs as requested by Brax (don’t ask), and now she was on her own. But Benny made friends easily, especially after her third drink. And she’d fallen in with a cheerful crowd of young ravers, accompanying them from pub to pub and on to several clubs.

She'd woken up late next morning on the sofa in someone's flat, to hear her unbearably cheerful young hosts discussing a lunchtime visit to the pub. Feeling distinctly fragile, Benny had made her excuses and left.

'Big night out?' asked her companion sympathetically.

'I'll say,' said Benny, thinking back over as much as she could remember. Had she really danced on the table in that club? And tried to punch out the doorman at the next one? 'A word of warning,' she said broodingly 'Stay away from those alco-pop thingies, they're not as innocent as they look. They say "pop", but really, all the time they're thinking "alco".'

'I'll bear it in mind,' said the woman calmly.

Benny sighed and swigged more coffee. 'I think I'm getting past this sort of thing.'

'What sort of thing?'

'The party animal lark. Time was I could whoop it up all night and dance all day. Not any more though.'

The woman smiled. 'Happens to us all. I sometimes think I'm slowing down a bit myself.'

Bernice surveyed her companion frankly. True enough, she was no longer young, but she was still strikingly good looking, her dark-red hair worn with a fringe. And although she seemed outwardly calm and poised, there was a twinkle in her eye, a hint of devilment, that suggested a livelier personality not far under the surface. Bernice sensed a fellow spirit. She nodded at the notebook. 'Reporter?'

'Is it so obvious?'

'Just a guess.'

'I'm hoping to have a programme on the telly in a while. But for now I'm freelancing. What about you?'

'Oh this and that,' said Benny vaguely. 'I'm an academic. I suppose. I wrote a couple of books on archaeology. Well, wrote one and started another. I'm busy. I travel a lot, okay?'

The woman seemed to be having trouble not laughing. 'That must be interesting.'

A kaleidoscope of experiences flashed through Benny's mind.

Murderous gangsters in thirties Chicago, bloodthirsty vampires on a bleak alien planet. An Ogron private eye and a curiously charming demon Crime Lord. Giant ants running a university, guarded by bloodsucking bugs. Squat dome-headed warriors and glowing giant jellyfish...

How could she tell this nice English lady reporter of all the things she'd seen or done? Someone whose greatest worry was spelling the vicar's name wrong when reporting the village fete!

'It's certainly been interesting,' she said. 'Scary too, sometimes.'

‘I used to travel a lot at one time in my life,’ said the woman unexpectedly. ‘With a particular friend. He was an academic too.’

‘What line?’

‘Difficult to say. Almost everything really. He was a sort of troubleshooter. He... fixed things.’

Benny looked at her with sudden interest. ‘I had a friend like that once. He got me into a lot of trouble. And out of it. What was yours like?’

‘Brilliant. Charming. Bad-tempered. Mysterious.’

‘What did yours look like?’

‘Silver-haired man of distinction for a while. Then he changed suddenly, and ended up all teeth and curls.’

‘Had himself a makeover,’ said Benny. ‘Who says men aren’t vain? Doesn’t sound anything like mine, though. What happened to him eventually?’

‘You might say he dumped me,’ said the woman calmly. ‘He got an urgent call home, something to do with his job. He dropped me off and disappeared.’

‘Ever see him again?’

‘Just once, briefly. He took me to a sort of family reunion. Then he brought me home and disappeared again.’

‘Tough,’ said Benny sympathetically.

‘It was for a while. It was all a long time ago. What happened to your friend?’

‘We just drifted out of touch. I often think about him though, keep expecting him to pop up again. He was a funny little devil, but I was fond of him.’ Benny smiled. ‘Funny how it’s the ones you can’t pin down who stick in your mind.’

‘Isn’t it always?’

Benny drained her mug. ‘One more of these and I’ll be ready to rejoin the human race.’

‘Let me get it. Double espresso, right?’

Benny watched as she went over to the counter, a fantastic suspicion forming in her mind. Could it possibly be the same...? No, it couldn’t, she decided. After all, there were plenty of charming, charismatic and callous men in the cosmos. Just because they’d both run into one, it didn’t have to be the same one... Did it?

The woman returned and put a steaming coffee mug in front of Benny. ‘That should complete the cure.’

‘Where’s yours?’

‘I have to be off. Got a dodgy model agency to investigate.’

‘Pity. Well, nice talking to you.’

‘Same here.’

Benny held out her hand. ‘We never even introduced ourselves. The

name's Bernice Summerfield. Benny to my friends.'

They shook hands.

'Sarah,' said the woman. 'To my friends.' She hesitated, then said,

'If you do run into the Doctor again, give him my love.' She smiled at the astonished Benny and turned away. Then she turned back. 'Oh, and a word of warning to you. If he offers you a trip to Metebelis Three, famous blue planet of the Acteon galaxy – don't go!'

'I'll bear it in mind,' said Benny.

She watched as the woman turned and left the restaurant, disappearing into the crowded street.

5: Alien Planets and You

(A Beginner's Guide to Bernice Summerfield)

By Dave Stone

(Found amongst the personal effects of Bernice Summerfield and marked: *If you put it out like this I'm going to hunt you down and kill you.*)

The first thing to bear in mind about an alien planet is: how the hell do I get there in the first place? I mean, I'm currently dictating this from inside a state of the art, one-seater HyperDynix point-to-point probe-ship, but I'm quite aware that the chances of you, reading this, being able to afford that kind of luxury are virtually nil. If you call a cabin into which you can barely fit without room for even an extra packet of nuts a luxury, which I don't.

Commercial and chartered flights have their various joys and prices – but the best method, I've found, is to find yourself involved, for no particular reason you can fathom, with some incredibly rich and powerful and suspicious-sounding person to whom you wouldn't trust the life your dog, if you had one, who wants you to locate some collection of really important artefacts and totems and whatnot. This is the sort of thing, in my experience, that happens all the time – and used judiciously, can take you anywhere you might happen to want to go.

Whichever you chose, the most important thing is make absolutely sure that somebody at home knows where you're going – something, it just occurs to me, that I've forgotten to do on this occasion. Oops.

When you *get* there – and have recovered somewhat from the attentions of local Customs officials, who on the whole it is not a good idea to ask if their heads actually fill their pointy hats – the first order of business is to find the nearest bar.

It is said that the brewing and winemaking industries are the finest flower of any culture. Let's examine the finest flower of this particular culture. Let's examine it again. You're my best bleeding mate, you are.

The state of the bathrooms and the plumbing are also a good indicator of the general level of the civilisation. Just be aware of whether a particular bathroom is also used for such civilised practices as were famously noticeable in Ancient Greece – so you can look your best. If you happen to be looking a bit raddled that day, you can put people right off.

What might look like simply sitting around and wasting time in a bar, in fact serves an entirely practical and functional purpose. If you're anything like me, you'll know that anywhere you go – absolutely anywhere – you'll find that you've gone there as part of some nebulous and utterly nefarious scheme in which the various perpetrators want to use you as a pawn.

Just sitting there in the bar tends to worry such people, who on the whole have to work to a deadline – so in the end they'll almost always try to hurry things along by sending in a couple of strong-arm thugs who try to bundle you out of the bar and into the local equivalent of a car.

Now, the thing about this – the absolutely important and vital thing to remember – is that in these circumstances, the last thing you actually need is for some masked and exo-armoured man to suddenly appear and rescue you. It leaves your luggage, your special equipment and the best part of your drink back in the bar. You end up several streets away, on the run, so disorientated that you have not the slightest idea of where you're running to – and worst of all, when the guy finally stops and takes his mask off, it only turns out to be your bloody ex-husband.

Every single bloody time!

You then have to listen to the story of how some or other danm mates of his down the pub, in between general drinking, oinking and trying to grope the bar staff, managed to impart the information that you might be in trouble, so he ponced some kind of transport of his own and came to try to help out.

A couple of matchsticks are always useful in this situation, I've found, as are nodding the head intelligently and making a few comments like well I never and how frightfully clever of you. The delivery of the lines doesn't matter, on the whole, because the guy will assume that you're trying to mask a depth of feeling by sounding surly.

Of course, you have to listen with half an ear, because he eventually gets round to suggesting who might really be behind all the nefarious plotting and so on. You can tell when this is coming up, because it's never the Large Gorgonzola who hired you to look for various artefacts and totems and whatnot who's doing it. It's always one of his or her hangers-on. The Grand Vizier, or Supreme Torturer and Inquisitor, or Trusted Lieutenant, or head of the Secret Police or some such. No great surprise that it's someone like that, of course, but there are generally any number of such hangers-on knocking around, and it's always useful to be able to finger the right one..

Such information can rapidly become academic, of course, because

it is almost always at this point that those from whom you have been running catch you up, or burst into the room you've found in which to hide.

Now, at this point, it is always worthwhile asking whether the thugs are licensed members of the Intergalactic Guild of Henchmen, Minions and General Appliers of Muscular Force. This is because, on these occasions, members of the IGHMGAMF are only allowed to carry power-weapons with settings ranging from 'give the target a bit of a dead arm' to 'knock the target out for a bit'. If the answer is yes, always remember to get a receipt, so's you can make a claim on the guild's reparation-fund if and when you ultimately survive.

Of course, if the thugs are merely local freelancers, and armed with big wooden sticks, getting a receipt might be a bit of a problem.

THINGS TO DO WHILE HANGING FROM A WALL WITH YOUR BLOODY EX, WHILE WAITING FOR A FATE WORSE THAN DEATH AND THEN DEATH:

1. Bicker.
2. Assign the blame precisely where and to whom it belongs.
3. Shout at bloody ex-husband when he refuses to accept that it's his fault.
4. Share a bit of a generally tender moment – it all helps to pass the time.
5. Start bickering again.

By this time, when the minions finally come to take you off to the hideously evil villain who's behind everything, it can all seem a bit of a relief.

There's always an Inner Sanctum or a Central Control Room or something – it's a fundamental part of being a hideously evil villain who's behind everything. Things to look out for include:

- The hideously etc. villain seeming just a little bit twitchy. This is probably because all his perfectly inhuman villainous plans have been carried out by ordinary dumb humans – well, at least, ordinary dumb *people* – and all the various things they've got wrong are by this point turning round to bite him on the arse.

- Bloody ex-husband, if he's been brought in with you, surreptitiously attempting to loosen his various bonds and straps.

Resist the urge to tell him he's an idiot and check your own bonds.

Remember – a hand or foot completely wrecked by dragging it out of a manacle can be repaired. A head blown off by somebody firing at a sitting duck, at point-blank range, cannot.

– Any guard or attendant thug who looks like things might be going a bit too far for him – I mean, he probably only signed on because of the medical-and-dental package and the fact that the uniform is good for getting a certain sort of girl.

– Generally zappy and lethal-looking loose power-cables. Or, conversely, some mystical source of wobbly green zappy energy that might be rediverted.

Hideous and evil villain will now pounce on rabidly about what it is he thinks will actually be *achieved* by all the nefarious plotting and such.

Such pouncing-on can by and large be safely ignored, consisting as it almost always does of his hideously villainous plan to have everybody Doing What He Says, so he can finally be free of the memory of a mother who did things to him with a cheese-grater or whatever. Be sure to interject the appropriately pert and ironically insulting responses – you are working to someone else’s internal script, now, and there are certain forms to be observed.

You will by this point, naturally enough, have noted all the elements above and worked out precisely which combination of some or all of them will allow you extricate yourself from your current predicament, dispose of the hideously evil villain in the process and save such portion the day as needs to be saved. It is then just a matter of –

Excuse me. I have to stop dictating for a moment. Grand Exquisitor Gorbarobuglar Wom of the Soul-reaver Potentates wants to know just what the hell I’m doing mumbling into the portable recorder on my lapel...

So, anyway. After extricating oneself from such perilous situations by being utterly and inexpressibly brilliant, things more or less become plain sailing. If the planet has oceans or dunes that people sail on, at any rate.

The thanks of various governments, goodwill of princes...

Remember that it might come off as slightly tacky to ask if they can pay off your Galactic Banking credit-chip, but this should not stop you grabbing every freebie that might be going with both hands. You might even get a small upgrade on your hotel.

Just remember – and I speak from experience – to get out before the bar-bill bankrupts the entire planet.

– Notes –

1. The ship banked through the subdimensional void of InfraSpace, engine-emissions skeining out behind it to swirl and coalesce like neon oil on water...

2. The Great High Poobah of the Soul-reaver Protectorates frowned, the multiple folds of his wattle quivering, on the holo-screen, in what might or might not have been barely-suppressed indignation.

‘Be that as it may, Professor Summerfield, I am quite reliably informed that you are the most... appropriate person for the job. Had you not been, the commission would have never been offered in the first place.’

3. ‘Glark!’ said Benny, ‘Glub, brek glak, ug, *blaaark!*’

4. ‘You will come with us.’ The larger of the two gripped her arm, in a manner that suggested letting go simply wasn’t an option, but that he could grip it one hell of a lot harder – hard enough to break the bone – if he wanted to.

5. ‘Oh, come on.’ Jason rolled up the polymimetic hood and stuffed it into his backpack. ‘Who the various hells did you *think* I was?’

6. ‘Grand Exquisitor Gorbarobuglar Wom, actually,’ said Jason. ‘What made you think it was an invasion force of super-intelligent space weevils?’

7. ‘Just get the hell away!’ Jason cried, clutching at his broken arm. ‘Get out before they send in reinforcements!’

8. ‘Sorry about that,’ said Benny. ‘I can’t think *what* got into me, there.’

Her ex-husband forbore to comment.

9. ‘So you see...?’ Grand Exquisitor Gorbarobuglar Wom gloated, slotting the last piece into place, his face bathed in a pulsing green light. ‘When the Amulet of Fibrillation is finally combined with the Sacred Tripod of Slugi Was, the very power of the Soul Dimensions themselves is unleashed! And now... and now...’

10. ‘My god, Benny!’ Jason stared around himself at the transformed chamber, at what the luckless Grand Exquisitor Gorbarobuglar Wom had become. ‘It’s... how could you have known that something so incredible would happen? You could have never guessed omsetting like that in a million years!’

Benny shrugged, ‘Let’s just say I had some help – from a completely unexpected source. Come on, Jason. I’ll tell you all about it on the way out.’

And she did..

6: Something Broken

By Paul Ebbs

*Kinda busy right now. I'm about to be blown up.
Who said being an archaeologist couldn't be fun, eh?*

The problem with being an archaeologist is that people expect you to be academic and dull. They expect you to shake your head and for the dust settled in your hair from a million tomes to litter downwind like so many ancient memories. They expect you to look at them over the rims of your glasses and 'tut' reproachfully at anything remotely approaching fun. That wasn't the reason I wanted to go on the Game Show – but that's what I scribed on to the electroform. There's no way they would have accepted me on to the show if they knew the real reason. No way on Dellah.

*'She can't say that!'
'She just did!'
'Call the security-bots! Get her off my screens!'*

When you're setting out to piss somebody off, I mean really get under their skin and cause them irritation, you have to engage in a certain amount of *hands-on* deception and misdirection if you're going to get to see the full effect. There's no point doing it from afar. Where's the fun in that? Although, last week I did scam Brax into sailing his space yacht the wrong way around the Bestapon Nebula, (the... er... *tricky* way), by turning the navcircuits of the yacht's control systems the wrong way up. But what's a drunk archaeologist to do when her employer has refused her leave to go shopping and the steady state systems on his yacht are so invitingly *upsidedownable*?

No, to get the full effect of pissing someone off, you have to be there to successfully rub their bloody noses in it.

*'She's eluded the security-bots!'
'Where is she going?'
'The transmitter!'
'Shoot her! Just shoot her!'*

Revenge. Ummm. No, not revenge. I mean they didn't do it to me. I wasn't even a twinkle in history's eye when they did what they did.

Though this may very well go down in the Meedja-histories of the CollasacSystem as an act of revenge, it wasn't really. Revenge is

grand and romantic, and I'm just me. Yes, I'd been angry when I'd found out; yes my blood had boiled and Joseph had taken to locking himself in cupboards for a few days to escape me, I feel, quite justified ire.

But what this really was was an act of pure Meedja-Terrorism.

I was going to bring down an entire Galactinational overnight with no weapons other than a sharp tongue and a highly developed sense of irony. I had to be cool. I had to be calm. I had to be *bloody* brilliant.

'She's tampering with the fluencegenerator!'

'I can see that!'

'Call in an air strike!'

Once upon a time I was never one for getting tangled up in *causes*. Not really. I didn't go to any of the pro-Capitalism riots at university, or join the Double the Debt Soc. I never quite managed to get off with any of the oiks in cable-knit jumpers, who all the other girls sat dreamily at the feet of, listening to every silky utterance on the need for tighter controls on the masses and the removal of state interference in industry. I was always the one who bought into the un-cool ideas.

'Can't we just stop talking about politics for a few minutes?' – 'Shut up Benny!' – That sort of thing. So to find that the vast majority of my adult life has been caught up on one polarised side or other, in some godforsaken death trap; has in reality been a bit of a surprise – pardon the pun.

Sigh.

I guess when you come up against the cold reality of tyranny; it breaks something in you. Something that can never be mended.

So, revenge? No. A scream against injustice? Hell, yes.

'Airstrike on its way.'

'Good. Get me a close up of the Professor. I wanna see her die in widescreen.'

'Camera One. B.E.C.U.'

So here I am in the rain – the driving chill rain – it's pinpricking my skin and saturating my clothes. I'm waiting for an airstrike that is going to blow my constituent atoms into a disparate cloud of gas. I'm trying desperately to get my fingers to work in the wet cold and disable the fluencegenerator that was causing my cause-joining cortex to get so worked up.

'We should do something about it, Brax!'

'Why? Where does the mission statement for the Collection talk about

Meedja-Terrorism? Just exactly where does it say that? There's no point looking it up, Bernice, I wrote the Mission Statement. It's not there. And I know that look of yours, so don't you dare think about pulling it in retroactively by means of nefarious time travel!

'But they engineered a war! Millions died! They engineered a war for profit! You have the evidence, why won't you use it?'

'Blastertal are a highly regarded Galactinational, with a long and illustrious history.'

'They sold the visinews rights across the slice! You've seen the files!'

'The flies came into the Collection by... shall we say... unorthodox means, as part of the Collasac Exhibit – we can't draw attention to that unorthodoxy by letting on that we know. The war is over; there's nothing we can do now. It's ancient history.'

'It's not ancient history! Two hundred years, that's all! That's not even two millimetres of dust! Blastertal made its fortune on the back of that war! Not only did it use the fluencegenerator to pitch powerblock against power-block, it also sold them the weapons they used to prosecute the conflict! For all you know they're still using the fluencegenerator to control other Meedja projects. That Game show... what's it called.. errrrr.'

'Eat the Poor.'

'You watch it?'

'If it's on.'

'Blastertal make that show. It's their baby. They could be manipulating audiences to watch it!'

'And...?'

'Brax, you're infuriating!'

'Bernice, the leave you wanted...'

'Yes?'

'Take it.'

'Can I borrow the yacht?'

'Once you've repaired it, by all means.'

Obviously, I didn't plan on dying.

The fluencegenerator was more complicated than I thought. With the rain lashing into my eyes and the desperate urgency of the situation, I was really beginning to think that this wasn't going to work out the way I'd planned.

The lid finally came off the top of the fluencegenerator as the jets screamed in on their final approach. The schematics that Joseph had called up while I was playing *Eat the Poor* seemed to be a jumble of images through the mist of rain on my floppyscreen. I just had time to wipe the droplets from the surface, punch in the codes and wait for death in the shape of a big orange explosion.

'You transmitted the files to every home on Collasac and used the

fluencegenerator as a catalyst for the population to rise up against Blastertal and bring it to its knees. How did you know the military would call off the airstrike?’

‘I didn’t’

‘You took a terrible risk.’

‘I know, I think I have something broken inside. It kind of screws with my judgement calls sometimes. You gave Joseph the codes to call up the schematics, didn’t you? He didn’t find them by accident, did he?’

‘No. Computers are terrible liars.’

‘Why, Brax?’

‘Maybe you tickled my cause-joining cortex.’

‘Perhaps you have something broken too.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘I thought you didn’t want to get involved... The Collection...’

‘The Collection wasn’t involved. I sacked you when you escaped on my “stolen” yacht.’

‘...’

‘If you’d like to fill in these electroforms, I’ll think about taking you back.

Rehabilitation of offenders and all that... ‘

‘...’

Bloody typical.

7: The Collection

By Peter Anghelides

Prison diary of Jason Kane:

‘You wouldn’t think to read this that I’ve been dead for two thousand four hundred and seven years...’

This is a wholly remarkable account from several millennia ago. It describes dreadful privation, including unspeakable mental and physical torture, in a prison gulag. And yet, these many hundreds of years later, it resonates with us today on a personal, indeed a visceral level. Though the author is long dead and unreachable, his searing prose touches the heart of his readers now, speaking across the centuries as a contemporary. It is a coming to terms, a stoically resigned acknowledgement of his mortality, an unutterably brave personal account from a man setting down his final thoughts for a future reader he can never know. For today’s reader, this is more than just a character in prose. This is a living, breathing, suffering individual.

What made this man so convinced that he could never elude his captors, so despondent, so despairing of escape? And, when one analyses the prose, how did he anticipate the stylistic elements that would make his text so accessible to readers one or two thousand years in the future? Discover for yourself by obtaining this remarkable and unpublished account.

The diary is in plum-coloured leather with gilt lettering, offered in very good condition.

Two thousand four hundred and seven years later: Internal Memorandum. Braxiatel Collection:¹

To: All staff

From: Irving Braxiatel

Access to the Pons Asinorum² is to be further restricted. As you are already aware, this part of the Collection has always been controlled by need-to-know access. With immediate effect, no visitors will be allowed access to the Pons Asinorum archive, and staff access will be permitted only by visit-by-visit approval by me. There will be no exceptions.

Bernice Summerfield’s diary (Contemporary):

Braxiatel is going through one of his being-a-pain phases. I suppose the good news is that these never last for more than eight years at a stretch. Or maybe it just feels that way. He let slip a few months back that he was approaching his fifteen hundreds. Perhaps it's a mid-life crisis.

Anyway, he's heard me talk often enough about how you can spot people lying by the almost-imperceptible wrinkling of their brow, or an increase in their blink rate, or the way they touch their lips while they're speaking. Knowing that he knows this (are you paying attention? be testing you later) makes it easier to spot when he's unloading a whopper. His problem is that he's too clever to be smart enough to fool me. He sits in his high-backed chair against the grande fenetre (feeble attempt to make it hard to see his face), the huge window that looks out on to the Versailles gardens (vain effort to distract my attention), and he composes his features into a mask of indifference that makes him look like he's been switched off to save the batteries. Unemotional. Detached. And talking complete arse through his teeth for a full thirty minutes.³

Mind you, he makes no pretence that he's the least bit interested in the fact that Jason has been missing for three months. In fact, he is perfectly rude about it, in a cold way that I hardly recognise.

'Since when were you concerned about your wastrel ex-husband's latest and shortest absence? Haven't you managed without him for three years at a stretch in the past?'

I narrow my eyes into slits. 'His researchers left on the early shuttle, after only two days. They're already off-planet. And it's only me who gets to describe Jason as a wastrel'

Braxiatel tries out one of his thin smiles. 'His researchers ?' he says, with the emphasis on tarty half-dressed slappers .

I decide that if I narrow my eyes any more I'll be shutting them completely.

'You authorised his excavation by the Small Trianon. And I frankly didn't care if it was just his excuse for an extended period of al fresco slap-and-tickle.'

'The lady doth protest –'

'Oh, but she'll keep her word,' I snap back. 'I went out on the OS-Flyer because I thought they might have dumped and abandoned him, and I thought I could do with a laugh. But he's not there. He hasn't left the planet since then, yet his plasti-disc hasn't registered on the system for the past three months. The trailis cold. I mean, what's be eating? Unless he's chewing his way through your orchard.'

'My dear Bernice, when will you let this go? You've told me often enough that your relationship is... as cold as this trail.'

'As cold as your demeanour.'

'You feel this attachment like an amputee still feels the missing limb.' He waves one of his own limbs languidly, indicating my hand. 'I see you're

wearing the ring again. I didn't realise you were as attached to it.'

I've been [passage crossed out here] .

'And besides,' I shout at him. 'What the bloody hell is this memo? You allow that creep Dokien to run the Pons Asinorum section. When he bothers to turn up, that is, I've never caught up with him. He's there, then he's not. Sometimes the other staff know where he is, and sometimes they deny that he ever existed.

What's the deal with that?'

'He has ad hoc working arrangements,' says Braxiatel. 'He's one of our more specialist staff whose personal circumstances and idiosyncrasies are tolerated for the benefit of the library.'

'Well, at least when he is there I bet he's more helpful than that irascible dwarf Stendurp in Allocations and Disposals.'

Braxiatel does one of his I'm-humouring-you sighs. 'Are you here to do my staff appraisals, or is there something important?'

'It's important that I get into the Pons Asinorum. Or will you let them turn me away like a snotty visitor? I mean, I wouldn't want to look too stupid.'

'Too late,' says Braxiatel

I stalk out before I realise exactly how rude he's just been.

Unspecified: Internal Personnel Record, Braxiatel Collection:

Full name: Dokien5 (no further nomenclature)

Personnel number/library card: 000002

Salary: n/a.

Working hours: Permission granted by Irving Braxiatel for this employee to work on a basis to be agreed periodically and on an ad hoc basis subject to the needs of the Collection and the availability of the employee.

Hire date: n/a.

Security restrictions: None. The employee is allowed access to all and any part of the Collection.

Comments: Employee is unsalaried. Expenses to be routed through Irving Braxiatel's employee account.

Bernice Summerfield's diary (Contemporary – Post-it note over previous entry):

I couldn't work out why Braxiatel was making a feeble excuse about closing the Pons Asinorum section. And I didn't have a chance to discuss it, after he threw me off guard (the git, did I mention I taught him that, too? There are some students that you wish weren't such a quick and diligent study) when he spotted me fiddling with my wedding band.

I sit on my bed and stare at the wedding band. I should have shoved it up

Jason's nose instead of shoving it in my satchel. For a while, even after the divorce, I carried it with me. Eventually, I put it aside, no longer wanting the constant reminder of Jason's inconstancy. So finding it now is like coming across a ticket stub for the gig where you met your first boyfriend. No, not that, actually – more like the way some people keep their gallstones in a jar after the operation.

I spend twenty minutes pretending to look at the ring, but actually seeing far beyond it. PTO

[Continues on other side of Post-it note]

I'd put the wedding band on the ring finger of the wrong hand so that I wouldn't lose it again. Because I needed it to fit nasally when I caught up with Jason. Braxiatel knows where Jason is, and the Pons Asinorum is obviously where I'll find the answer. I'll decide, not Braxiatel, when I want to give up on Jason Kane.

The next day: Internal Memorandum. Braxiatel Collection:

[Note: unlike most of the contemporary Collection internal memoranda, this is handwritten.]

To: Irving

From: Dokien

Bernice wangled her way into the P.A. as expected during my 'lunch break'. Speaking of which, if they promise to wash their hands carefully, couldn't you let staff bring their sandwiches in?

My so-called assistant may starve to death one day.

I was back in time to spy on her using the Gossetrez archive. (It wasn't as if she had to sneak out past me, of course. I hope you know what you're doing. I know, I know, I can talk.) See you in a few months, unless I've already seen you last week in the meantime, of course. *[signed]* D.

Bernice Summerfield's diary (Contemporary):

Oh, bugger. Jason's dead.

I suppose I'm going to have to do something about that.

No bloody wonder Braxiatel was so concerned about closing the Pons Asinorum. He must have known what was in the Gossetrez archive. Probably thinks he can't fiddle around with the web of time, or some such bollocks.

I have a more robust approach to these problems.

Hidden in a cobwebby far corner of the room (has he banned the cleaner units too?) was a bashed old wooden chest full of machinery. I'd not have given it a second thought, except one of Jason's horrid buccaneer boots was balanced on top of it. It didn't take me long to spot the diary. It had a waxy, semi-transparent sleeve over a purple leather cover.

It came as an amusing surprise to discover Jason hadn't just been

missing for three months, but dead for two and a half thousand years.

He'd died somewhere on the Braxiatel planetoid. Inside the purple cover I found purple prose: three months of maudlin self-aggrandisement in Jason's familiar careless scrawl. Even after being dead for several millennia, he had an irritating voice.

This 'prison diary' makes him out to be some great archaeologist who got irretrievably stranded and wrote his last record in squalid and degrading conditions before giving up the ghost in utter despair after ten years of isolation.

Fortunately for him, a real archaeologist (that would be me) was able to piece together the clues about how he got there in the first place. The machinery I found in the Pons Asinorum was all from the original excavation around the Small Trianon; dug out when the Collection was first built.

No point involving Braxiatel, I had to locate Jason for myself.

Of course, the first thing he said when I did find him was 'what kept you?'

Personal Diary of Jason Kane (Contemporary):

I could tell she wasn't pleased to see me. It being a couple of thousand years before Braxiatel got his hands on the place, there weren't any local Flyers, so Benny had been obliged to walk around KS-159 in low gravity. After coming back in time, that was.

'If you'd taken the Gossetrez equipment to the Small Trianon, you'd have saved yourself a walk,' I said helpfully.

'I should have left you to rot, and flogged your memoirs for ten shillings,' she said. Then she spotted something else. 'And speaking of your memoirs, where's the squalor? Where's the torture? It's got very plush carpet for a dungeon.'

'Yeah right,' I said. "'Oh, help! I'm trapped in the broken remains of a crashed interstellar exploratory vehicle. I have enough food to last me for the rest of a long natural life.'" You'd have rushed to find me, wouldn't you?' I changed sofas to avoid her baleful eye. 'It won't fly, the comms are trashed, and the original crew were flown off the original wreck about four hundred years ago, a long time before I got here. Just good luck to find it.' I decided to change tack. Big smile, gesture like I want a hug. 'I can't tell you how relieved I am to see you, Benny. It's been three months of hell.' As an unwise afterthought, I waggled my foot and added: 'Thanks for returning my boot.'

She threw the remains of my caviar at me. 'Don't treat me like a delivery service,' she yelled. 'Why are you here?'

'You won't believe me.'

'When's that ever stopped you?' Lightly-toasted bread bounced off my forehead.

'I came to rescue you.'

'Sure you did.'

So I showed her the diary. 'Benny, I've missed your voice, really I have. But just for a moment will you do less talking and more reading?'

She hardly looked at the diary before she handed it back and said, 'You've got better at forging my handwriting.'

'Don't you ever stop?'

'Only to reload.'

She was obviously searching for heavier missiles. I thrust the diary at her again. 'Read the goddamn book.'

Bernice Summerfield's diary (Contemporary):

He can't fake my handwriting this well. I wrote this diary. It's bound in stiff black linen, aged and cracked and stained over thousands of years. It's the same sort of book as the diary of Jason's that got me into this mess. Same size. Same interior paper, too. Jason's retired to a position of safety by the bar, in case I throw the book at him. Instead, I sit and read it for ten minutes, flicking ahead more and more as the facts start to sink in.

It describes ten years of being trapped here. Increasingly hopeless attempts to communicate with anyone off the planetoid. Futile efforts to repair the Gossetrez space vessel. A final resigned acknowledgement of my fate. The final entry says: No more, now. What's the bloody point?'

Jason has seen I've finished reading. He's speaking softly. 'I got my hands on that diary at the dig in the Small Trianon.'

'I thought you were getting your hands on your researchers,' I reply, but my heart isn't in it.

He at least has the decency to look embarrassed. 'That was the original point, yeah. But finding your diary put an end to my explorations.'

'Imagine how sorry I am that your explorations were curtailed.'

'Life is full of surprises,' he sighed. 'And sorry should be your middle name. I haven't got my leg over now for, what, two and a half-thousand years?'

'You can wipe that look off your face.'

'Oh, c'mon Benny. Aren't you at least selfishly pleased that I found your prison diary? That's what put paid to my dig, of course.'

'Why didn't you warn me?'

'Brax said that -'

'Brax said? Oh great, you'd ask him first. He gave you some rubbish about the Laws of Time, I suppose.'

'I'm afraid so.' Jason is so cute when he's cowed. Then he spoils it by saying brightly: 'Nothing to stop me coming back and rescuing you, though.'

'My hero, Jason Kane.'

'So I looked for the other things with the same source reference as the

original dig, the Gossetrez artefacts. Got some hints from Dokien in the archive.'

'Oh, you've met him, then.'

'No, he sent me a text message. He suggested I use the time ring, my wedding ring that is, as a booster for the Gossetrez artefacts, to get back here. I still wear mine. Sometimes.'

I watch as he fiddles with the wedding band on his finger. He's wearing his ring on his left hand. 'You didn't use it to get home again?'

'Most of the Gossetrez equipment here was smashed in the original crash-landing.'

'Or maybe the ring has faded,' I suggest. 'As time passed, the intensity of its effect waned.'

'A bit like our marriage then,' says Jason. He bites his lip.

'Wait a minute...' I stare hard at him as the realisation slowly sinks in. 'You wrote the other diary, the purple one, knowing it would be discovered.'

'Yes!' He is suddenly beaming at me, like I've given him a gold star. He's been away too long, he obviously no longer recognises the menace in my voice. 'Well, I hoped it would be. I couldn't make it too obvious, I couldn't just write "stuck in the past, please rescue me". Anyone finding an out-of-date message in a bottle in a hundred or a thousand years would just chuck it. So the thing had to have some intrinsic value, so that it would be discovered and then become part of the Braxiatel Collection. So I... well, I elaborated a bit.'

I want to slap him. 'You might have elaborated on the part that explained it was a one-way journey for your time ring.'

'And that would have helped how, exactly?'

I punch him hard in the nose. I leave my fist stretched out so that, when he gets up, he can see the fingers on my right hand. 'It would have helped me not to use my ring in the same way and make the same mistake.'

Contemporary: Selection from lecture charts by guest Admiral Sir Jason Kane at the Adventurers Club:

Essential Survival Planning:

Concentration: Choose separate cabins in the wreck of the Gossetrez vessel.

Focus: Write a daily diary for ten years.

Authenticity: Use available stationery on the vessel.

Truth: No room for evasion or lies, no matter how painful. Truth sits upon the lips of dying men (Matthew Arnold).

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Speaker notes:

Don't mention that BSS threw a hissy fit and refused to have anything to do with you, and banished you to a separate guest cabin for the

whole period. Stress how both diaries had to be rewritten from scratch. The ones you had with you were already 2.5 thousand years old, and wouldn't survive another 2.5 thou. (Had to destroy the 'originals'.) Also couldn't change any text in the 'rewrites', in case the alteration changed the future and you both got trapped forever.

Move on quickly to next chart if the quote doesn't get a big laugh.

Effective Results:

Preparedness: Expect the unexpected.

Bravery: Be ready to spend the rest of your natural life alone on the vessel, if rescue never arrives.

Gratitude: Show your appreciation of your rescuers.

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Speaker notes:

Try to avoid mentioning how Brax scared the crap out of you by turning up out of nowhere while you were trying to break in to BSS's cabin one night in an attempt to start breeding new colony. Or how you punched Braxiatel to the ground. Or how BSS kicked him when he got back up again.

Note: to avoid this embarrassment, check that Brax hasn't sneaked in to the back of the audience again during the presentation.

Going Home:

Available technology: Top-quality rescue equipment.

Returning: A hero's welcome at the Braxiatel Collection.

Sharing: Explaining the adventure to those with a need to know.

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Speaker notes:

Explain how Brax found both diaries 2.5 thou years later, and got Dokien to help him return to the past. Stress that rescue equipment was provided by Brax (don't say he just got us to use our wedding rings together). Play down the fact that only BSS had missed you.

For future lectures, find out how Brax got there and back without a time ring.

Final point: Tell them that all your audiences are chosen v. selectively to learn of your brave exploits. Then get them to drum up business from anyone who will pay up front in cash.

Bernice Summerfield's diary (Contemporary):

I don't want to speak to Braxiatel for a while. Round about his two thousandth birthday is looking good. So it's a bit awkward when, as I'm on my way to the first available bus off KS-159, I can see him lurking by the shuttle walkway.

When I turn briskly on my heel to avoid him, I slam straight into a hard object.

This, as it happens, is Jason Kane, someone else who, if I never saw again in my whole life, it would still be too soon.

‘Bad luck,’ says Jason in an amusingly crumpled voice. ‘He’s already spotted us.’

I can see from the slight indecision in Braxiatel’s move towards us that he wasn’t expecting to see us either. ‘Saying goodbye to an old friend,’ he explains, even though we didn’t ask.

‘Dokien,’ says Jason. I’m surprised, and I show it. ‘I saw them walking here.’

Who is he really, Brax?’

Braxiatel’s long stride takes him past us and back in the direction of the Mansionhouse.

‘Is he you?’ shouts Jason. ‘You from a different time period?’

Braxiatel’s step falters. When he turns, though, he’s smiling. He does that affected, absent-minded professor thing with his glasses, pushing them up his nose.

‘No, he isn’t.’

‘Of course not,’ I say tartly. ‘That would be breaking Goddess-knows how many temporal by-laws, wouldn’t it? Though I wouldn’t put it past you to staff the entire place with yourself, to save on salaries.’ Now that he’s here, I want to keep him offguard. ‘Or are you keeping it in the family in an entirely different way?’

‘He’s the person who found your two diaries in the Collection, and brought them to my attention. Your little sketches were rudimentary, but the leaf collection was a nice touch.’ Braxiatel’s composure is already returning. ‘Weren’t you hurrying to catch the shuttle?’

I can hear the locking clamps are already disengaging. ‘Don’t change the subject. That was a very embarrassing rescue and I have my suspicions as to how you managed it.’

Braxiatel continues his walk back to the Mansionhouse. I hurry after him.

I’m not surprised to find Jason trotting along after us.

‘I’m surprised,’ says Brax, ‘that I had to rescue you at all. You could have worked out that the rings still worked when put together. If you’d set aside your ridiculous personal differences, you’d have escaped on your own. Do you think I’d have left you there for a whole decade? Instead of the few weeks that you made to look like ten years?’

‘OK,’ says Jason. ‘You know about that.’

Braxiatel doesn’t even break his stride as he looks sideways at Jason. ‘I do now.’

Damn. ‘Well, it felt like ten years,’ I respond feebly. ‘What have you done with the rings?’

The off-planet shuttle roars into life and shoots a vapour trail over our heads as it races into the atmosphere.

'I didn't think you were that attached to them.'

'I'm not. Where are they?'

He is still watching the speck of shuttle on the horizon. 'Perhaps I gave them to Dokien as a thank you before he left for... wherever he's going.'

Jason seizes his arm and pulls him round to face us. 'They weren't yours to give away!'

Braxiatel gently disentangles himself from Jason's grip. 'Where do you think you got them from in the first place?'

I'm about to take my anger out on an inanimate object. Assuming, that is, that Jason will stand still while I kick him. But instead I heave a calming breath,

'You've come out of this ahead, as usual.'

He places the rings back in my hand. Jason quickly grabs his. 'I sincerely hope we all have.'

'You have the two prison diaries. They'll fetch a nice price, even though they're as fake as your sincerity.'

'You misjudge me,' he pouted.

'Never again,' I reply.

One week later: Internal Memorandum Braxiatel Collection:

To: Irving Braxiatel

From: Oscarby Stendurp, Chief Archivist (allocations and disposals)

Sir, As part of this memorandum, I do want to put on record formally that, while I respect your wishes, I remain unmoved and quite opposed to what I see as the unnecessary destruction of the artefacts.

Even in the unlikely event that you could persuade me that there was no place in the Braxiatel Collection for these two unique items, not even in the restricted Pons Asinorum section, they would without doubt recover a significant sum at auction. Such an alternative arrangement would have (a) raised significant capital for further purchases and (b) ensured that the artefacts were made available to future researchers through the good offices of another institution.

My reservations notwithstanding, I can confirm that the two prison diaries PA/PCD192002 and PA/PCD192003 have been destroyed, as per your instruction Z/76-8-887/B.

One thousand years later: Brandeltnark Auction House Catalogue:

Date: Three thousand years old (est.)

Type: Cloth-bound hand-written memoirs.

Guide price: 750,000 units.

Description: An unusual pair of historical prison diaries bound

separately, and illustrated throughout with contemporary hand-drawn illustrations, aides-memoire, notes, codes, sketches, geometric calculations, lists, and so forth. There are two pages with leaf collections pasted in.

Condition: Both books have some small age soiling and foxing on the interiors, though the cover plates are clean. Each book has been rebound. One in black buckram and original mottled cloth. There is rubbing and scuffing to extremities of the binding. The other in full blind stamped plum-coloured leather, gilt lettering, glassine dust jacket, chemise. The slipcase has a bit of edgewear at the top and bottom opening, but it is in very good condition. The book has a touch of fading at top and bottom edge. Otherwise, it is Near Fine. To be sold as a pair, these items cannot be separated. A fine addition to any collection.

– Notes –

1. Braxiatel Collection: Self-described ‘Greatest Collection of Everything in the Known Universe’, located on planetoid KS-159.

2. Pons Asinorum: In science, this is any problem that a beginner must solve in order to gain a basic understanding of a subject. (From a Latin phrase meaning ‘the donkey’s bridge’.) The origin is its use as a nickname for an elementary Euclidean theorem in geometry, which states that the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle (a triangle with two sides of equal length) are equal.

3. Talking arse through teeth: Speaking terminological inexactitudes. Believed to be a demotic late twentieth-century Earth phrase.

4. OS-Flyer: Ormand-Seltec rotary-winged local transportation around the Braxiatel planetoid.

5. Dokien: From the Greek, meaning to seem or appear.

6. Small Trianon: The smaller of the chateaux outbuildings in the grounds of the Collection Off-limits to all visitors, and rumoured to house the Oracle of the Lost (*q.v.*).

7. Shuttle bus: An occasional service to the Braxiatel collection with an irregular schedule based on the planetoids eccentric orbit and infrequent visitors.

8. Brandelmark: Established a minor reputation for unusual *objets*

trouvés and a major reputation for fencing stolen goods throughout four galaxies.

8: Setting Stone

By Mark Stevens

There, in the darkness ahead, two points of light. That's all you need to know that she's safe.

They blink once, then twice, their feeble pink glow flickering against the rockface a hundred yards ahead, further down the tunnel.

You lie there, eyes fixed on the lights, desperately trying not to guess the weight of all that rock above your head. Right now, this is just annoying. A slight earth shift and it becomes life and death.

The lights blink again. A sneeze.

'Nina?' The darkness absorbs your whisper. Did she hear you? You try again. 'Nina! It's me, Benny!'

The little pink lights vanish.

Great.

'Are you sitting comfortably?'

'Well, not really...'

'I'll begin anyway.'

'Hmmpf.'

'Once upon a time, in a land not so far away, there stood a palace, much wider and taller than any other building you could imagine.'

'What about the Serpens Cauda Terralith? That's a bit large.'

'Master Summerfield, if you'll refrain from interrupting every five seconds, we'll be able to get through these records in no time at all.'

'Okay, but it still sounds like a waste of time if you ask me. The moment the storm clears, we're going back for Benny.'

'According to the Collection's data library, this fairy tale is an accurate, if simple, distillation of this region's history –'

'Okay, whatever. Proceed, Joseph.'

'Within the palace lived the Imperial family. They hadn't been in the palace very long, for another family once lived there. However, the Imperial army stormed the palace one night, tore everyone to pieces with magical ribbons of light and decided this was to be their Emperor's new home.'

'The loyal subjects of the old King were most distraught and lived in fear of the new Emperor and his followers. The Emperor told the people they were no longer subjects but citizens. This was a good thing, he said, although the people still felt terribly afraid, for they knew the Emperor had access to magicks beyond their comprehension and would use them without a moment's thought.'

'The new citizens of the Empire obeyed the Emperor's word, but secretly prayed for salvation...'

You were beginning to entertain the notion that Nina had somehow given you the slip, that you were crawling deeper into oblivion (batteries not included), moments away from death at the hands of a freak geological hiccup or flash flood, unable to turn around within the cramped passage and crawl to safety.

But you're never truly alone, not really.

Adrian's still up there, somewhere, attempting to keep the shuttle in a geo-stationary orbit, waiting for an opportunity to drop back down to the surface when the chaotic weather eventually subsides.

But something's still not right. You felt it back on the shuttle, in the presence of the little girl. An odd sensation somewhere between dizziness and nausea, manifesting itself whenever you caught her gaze or happened to make fleeting physical contact.

As the ceiling of rock begins to recede and the passageway widens, your uncomfortable crawl becomes a cautious walk. A gentle breeze slides through the tunnel.

'Where there's a wind, there's a way,' you say to yourself. *Goddess, I'm still talking like him.*

'Benny?'

A faint, wavering voice in the darkness. It belongs to Nina. She can't be too far away now. You call out to her, hoping to reassure her this time round rather than drive her further away.

Adrian had initially thought that she was a stowaway, who'd secreted herself on board the shuttle during one of our numerous stopovers. A simple, logical explanation that you were quite prepared to accept. Joseph disagreed, however, plugging himself directly into the shuttle's computer interface to bombard you with all sorts of statistics to disprove this theory.

So where did she come from? The presence of a twelve year old girl, found wandering amidst the ruins of a civilisation that had abandoned the planet some six hundred years previously... well, it was baffling to say the least.

'Where are you?' were the first words she said to either one of you, once you'd escorted her back to the dig site, at a loss as to how you were going to explain this one to Brax.

You exchanged a quick glance with Adrian, a quizzical *do what?* look on one another's faces. Up until then, the girl had been content to sit in a nest of woollen blankets, saying nothing, staring at an unwrapped nutribar as if she were waiting for it to explode. Eventually tiring of the examination, she shrugged off the blankets, rose to her feet and approached Adrian to ask her bizarre question.

'I'm right here,' the grizzled Killoran had said, looking a little unsure that he'd given the right answer.

Nina had merely giggled and reached up on tiptoes to rub his snout. 'You're not there,' she concluded, glumly.

'Adrian's never been all there,' you said, just as the girl approached you and reached for your hand. Her hand was warm to the touch and it

-
It's dark.

Very dark.

You see nothing, but sense everything.

They're all there, watching you, listening, waiting.

You open your mouth to speak but hear no words.

They move closet expectantly. – felt smooth, like marble.

'Erm, what just happened?' you asked, suddenly feeling dizzy.

Nina merely smiled. 'You're right there!'

'That's nice to know.'

And with that, the little girl had pocketed the nutribar, kissed Adrian on the snout and ran away from the dig site, giggling as if it were all a game.

That all seems like a rather long time ago now.

Up ahead, those familiar pink lights emerge from the darkness.

'Help me, Benny,' says Nina as you approach the little niche of rock she's crouched in. 'I need to show you the statues.'

Intriguing. What the heck. Adrian won't be back for a little while yet and you certainly don't want to let the girl out of your sight.

'Okay,' you say. 'After you.'

Nina smiles and leads the way.

'Five years passed and the citizens of the Empire came to accept their Emperor; albeit reluctantly, fearful that he might turn his magicks upon them at any moment.

'But the followers of the dead, usurped King were not easily beaten. They allowed the Emperor his brief short-term victory, lulling him into a false sense of security whilst they secretly plotted his downfall.

'For it was during the summer of the Emperor's second year of rule that the prayers of the discontented were finally answered.

'The King's followers managed to secure the aid of a seer and a sorceress from a distant land, recommended to them by a former captain of the Royal Guard who often boasted of his friends in high places.

'At first, the followers dismissed the words of these strangers, for they talked of a powerful force that would descend from the heavens to set fire to the land and the sea.

'But the seer was able to demonstrate the truth of their words, for he

summoned forth a number of beings from the very air itself. The strange beings walked and talked as men, but maintained the countenance of reptilian creatures.

‘The followers accepted the wisdom of the seer and sorceress, taking them and the reptiles to their private counsel.

‘The Empire’s days were now numbered.’

Nina slips her hand into yours then turns to survey the derelict city that lies before you. Ever since you left the caves, you’ve started to feel disoriented again, although the nausea has subsided a little, replaced with a strange sense of *deja vu*.

‘Does your head itch?’ asks Nina, frowning. ‘You know, on the inside?’

You raise an eyebrow, unsure what she’s asking.

‘I thought mine would, now that we’re so close, but I can’t feel anything.’ She appears somewhat agitated now, perhaps a little upset.

‘Where are they?’

Before you can respond, she tugs you towards a broad set of steps.

You pause for a moment, your free hand shielding your eyes from the glare of the green sun. You can’t recall a sight more beautiful than the dead, fractured city that crawls away to disappear amidst a yellow haze on the horizon.

You realise that Nina has already led you halfway down the steps, descending towards –

– the plaza, hundreds of them, many of them barely dressed. The women are screaming, unable to seek comfort from their companions as the swordsmen intervene, tearing them away from one another, smashing the hilts of their swords into the faces of those who – – stumble, palms outstretched, on to the cracked paving stones.

You remain in a crouching position trying to make sense of what you just saw.

‘Benny?’ It’s Nina. ‘You okay?’

‘I think so,’ you say, hauling yourself to your feet, dusting yourself down as best you can. ‘I’m sorry if –’

‘Look.’

She points along the length of a boulevard that stretches away from you towards an impressive palatial structure, one of only a few buildings that appear to be more or less in one piece. The breathtaking architecture piques your professional curiosity, but you quickly realise that Nina isn’t pointing to the palace, but to the mass of objects that are gathered in the centre of the thoroughfare before it.

Nina leaves your side, skipping towards them, calling out to them.

She has finally found her statues.

And there are hundreds of them.

'It was said that the Emperor ruled over his Empire with an iron fist.'

'So far, so clichéd.'

'He kept it in a chamber under his palace.'

'Oh.'

'When the time came to wage war, he would ride into battle with his gauntlet held aloft, cutting down the enemy columns with caustic ribbons of light.'

'Soon, the Emperor was never seen without his gauntlet, for he no longer restricted its use to the battlefield. The citizens of the Empire began to fear their Emperor as never before. Some believed that the gauntlet had tarnished his soul and now ruled over him.'

'Meanwhile, the seer and sorceress held counsel with the dead King's followers. The reptilian people were also in attendance. They explained that the Emperor's source of power, the iron gauntlet, was in fact a sacred artefact of theirs. The Emperor had tricked them into parting with it and had now begun to wage war across the stars.'

'The people took pause at this point, confused by the notion of lands that lay amidst the stars, but the sorceress called for one of their star charts and explained how some people had built special ships that allowed them to sail between these stars. The sorceress had a way with words, so the King's followers agreed that this was the truth of the matter.'

'But the reptilian people were growing impatient. They couldn't allow the Emperor to continue waging war with their artefact and wished to take matters into their own paws.'

'Thankfully the seer persuaded them not to seek violent retribution, but instead aid the King's followers in their desire to reclaim their throne. The reptilian people agreed and lent the King's men an even more powerful artefact, on the understanding that they return it once the Emperor had been disposed of.'

'The King's men agreed and set to work.'

You walk amidst the statues for a while. Nina seems to know what she's doing, so you let her take your hand and lead the way.

Her pace remains cautious, slowing to a halt to inspect certain statues, quickening to hasten past the more disturbing ones. When there are more statues behind you than before, her search grows ever more erratic.

'If you tell me what you're looking for, I might be able to help,' you suggest.

Nina traces the contours of a statue with her hands. 'I can't remember what he looks like,' she says, forlorn. 'But they still live inside, you see?'

You nod politely, not entirely sure what she's talking about. You let her continue her search along the boulevard as you struggle to fight

back another wave of nausea and that mocking sense of *de la vu*, as if you're visiting an old childhood haunt only to find your sense of scale is bang out of whack.

What does it all mean?

You glance up at the green sun, hoping it will trigger some distant memory. It shimmers and disappears behind a cloud.

Considering the age of the palace, the interior is in remarkable condition. All the degradable trappings of wealth have long since rotted away, but the thick marble columns, archways and curving staircases remain intact and would be gleaming if it weren't for the thick layer of dust that covers them.

'Benny, come quick!'

You make your way up the largest, broadest staircase, matching Nina's footprints in the dust. Your head spins gently, so you grab the banisters for support.

The little girl meets you halfway, grabbing your hand, almost dragging you up the remainder of the steps, then escorts you across the remains of a rotting carpet, towards an archway that appears to lead outside to –

– a balcony. Someone's out there, silhouetted against the sky, leaning out over the parapet, frantically looking for something. There's a rusty, metallic clink from back within the palace. The young man whirls round to find two swordsmen edging their way across the hallway towards him, their feet padding gently against the carpet, swords drawn.

One of them grins, quickens his pace and moves out on to – – the balcony.

Nina is kneeling beside a figure. Another statue: one crouched low, with his back to the parapet, a fearful gaze upon his face. She touches his cheek, quite tenderly, then begins to weep.

'Who is it?' you ask.

She says nothing for a while, then beckons you to kneel beside her.

'Tell me what you hear,' she whispers, guiding your hand towards the statue's face.

How odd. At first, your hand slides away from the stone's surface, as if you were its magnetic polar equal. But then a tingling sensation shoots up your arm and something inside your head goes *pop*. You scream –

– in defiance as the swordsman strides menacingly towards the cowering young man, sword arm arcing backwards, ready to deliver a killing blow.

But the blow doesn't fall. Instead, the sword crackles with a violent energy, then a burning light emits a single powerful pulse.

Darkness first, then...

Reality begins to reassemble itself revealing a solid ebony statue where the young man once stood.

The swordsman is impressed. Did you –

‘– feel him, Benny?’

‘Feel who?’

‘My brother,’ she says, her hand still touching the statue’s cheek.

‘Is he still in there?’

You understand now.

You close your eyes, but it makes no difference. You collapse to your knees, feeling your stomach convulse as it sends your last meal splashing on to the dusty slabs beneath you.

‘It was on the hottest day of the summer that the Empire fell

‘The King’s followers planned their assault well, for they struck at the height of the summer carnival, whilst the Emperor’s armies were spread far and wide throughout the Empire and the elite were distracted by the celebrations and ample wine.

‘The Emperor’s daughter became the first victim of the uprising. The young girl had left the safety of the city to attend a picnic at the Boreal Falls. She rode within a poorly escorted cavalcade. The guards assigned to protect her consisted mostly of inexperienced youths, no obstacle for the King’s swordsmen. The girl herself offered little resistance.

‘The Emperor’s only son fell without much trouble, having elected to remain within the palace on the eve of the festivities. He managed to hide himself away at first, only emerging once he learnt that the palace staff and those at court were being gathered in the plaza below for execution. His own punishment swiftly followed.

‘The Emperor himself proved to be a little more resistant, not least because of his iron gauntlet. Dozens of the King’s men fell before him, writhing in agony as the gauntlet unleashed its power upon them. But the King’s men now had their own fearsome weapon, fashioned by the same people who had forged the Emperor’s hand.

‘When the King’s men unleashed their vengeance upon the pitiful usurper, a great explosion of light and sound engulfed them all. When their senses returned, a tall, marble trophy stood in the place of the Emperor; a facsimile carved in the smoothest of stone, forever locked in a haunting pose, a reminder to anyone who might gaze upon him that even the most merciless of men were themselves capable of begging for mercy in their final moments.

‘And so the battle was won.

‘The reptilian people reclaimed their artefacts and sailed back to their red home star, promising never to return. The seer and sorceress were invited to remain as the King’s most trusted aides, but they were needed elsewhere and departed in their twinkling blue box

‘The new King stood on the balcony of his palace, overlooking the plaza. All that remained of the former Empire cowered in eternal fear below, their

fate quite literally sealed, just as their Emperor's had been.

'Time to begin again.'

Nina sits on the parapet, legs dangling over the dangerous side. She looks like she's enjoying the feeling of the sun on her face.

'Used to be a lake over there, somewhere,' she says, indicating a deep depression just beyond the city's boundaries.

You gaze out over the balcony too. 'That must have been a long time ago.'

She swings round, hops off the parapet to kneel beside her calcified brother once more. 'He's gone,' she sighs. 'They've all gone.'

'But I could see them,' you say. 'Fragments, at least.'

'When they put us to sleep, for a while we could still hear each other's thoughts. We were all in a state of shock for some time.'

Nina pauses to touch her brother's face. She sighs.

'Most of them never recovered. They just disappeared without a trace. Some of us, mainly the younger ones, managed to stick it out.'

'What happened to you?' you ask. You nod towards the statue.

'Were you like this once?'

'Once. But they woke me up. Someone has to know, the others said. I had to find someone and let them know. About us.'

You remember a green sun, so bright that it could bleach buildings.

You remember bright summer skies, lakes that shimmered and sparkled, lush trees that rustled in the breeze. Such wealth and beauty.

'I remember,' you whisper to Nina. 'I was there.'

Nina simply sits there, in silence, her hand in yours. There's little warmth there now.

'We didn't want to do it this way,' you say. 'We just ran out of options. I'm sorry.'

You turn to gaze at the distant sun once more. Nina's hand feels cool to the touch, almost frozen, her skin much harder and smoother now, much like her brother's. You close your eyes, feeling the sun's warmth on your eyelids.

Then, a slight flicker in your mind's eye.

You see her there, in your thoughts, sitting on the balcony, staring out across the –

– plaza, with its colourful, bustling crowds who stomp and cheer as the procession winds out of the palace, towards the colossal gates.

The animals lumber across the boulevard at a surprisingly agile pace, huge soles slapping against the paving stones, the pendants of blue and mauve affixed to their baskets snapping in their wake.

The princess briefly peers over the basket of one of them, surveying the road ahead with a pocket telescope. Satisfied that the road ahead is safe,

she turns to the cheering crowds and waves goodbye.

9: Time's Team

By David A McIntee

People sometimes asked Bernice Summerfield – especially those who'd heard her use her title – what the point of archaeology was. She never quite knew how to answer them. Oh, it wasn't that she shared their doubts; it was just that the value of her profession was so obvious, and so deeply ingrained, that she couldn't put it into words.

It just was.

And she hoped that when the Koloppan HoloCast went out people would see for themselves. They'd watch, and they'd see how amazing it was that life forms could go from grubbing about in the earth to the stars. And they'd show it by grubbing about in the earth again. Have a drink; here's to irony.

Through her viewport, she could see the curve of Koloppo's northern hemisphere. People would see the value of archaeology?

Yeah, right. They'd watch, they'd enjoy, and then they'd forget.

If she ever actually got to bloody Koloppo.

The shuttle flight was supposed to last thirty-six hours. It had taken forty-eight. They'd finally arrived in the Koloppo system, but – perhaps because the ship was late anyway – they now couldn't get a descent slot.

Traffic was heavy today, both inbound, outbound, and nowhere-bound.

Bad enough when ground traffic gets snarled up, but trying to keep things safe when vehicles can move freely in three dimensions must be a total nightmare. If Benny had given voice to her thoughts, she suspected none of the other passengers or crew on the shuttle would have disagreed with her.

Drumming, the sort of music that network execs across the galaxy thought symbolised the raw and primitive.

Regardless of species, most sentient races had some kind of response to drumming hardwired into their hindbrains. The execs loved it for HistoryCasts, of course; the noble savage, and all that crap.

Benny groaned as the sound emerged from her compartment's viewing alcove. It could only mean that the HoloCast from the dig was starting. That, and that she was late.

She hated being late. She liked to think of herself as being relaxed, laid back... But she preferred to be relaxed and laid back on time.

The images were being transmitted from the Koloppan moon. In the

sky above the dusty cliffs onscreen she could see the occasional moving light, and wondered which of them was this shuttle. The cliffs themselves looked like cheese in a twentieth-century cartoon; smooth-bored holes set into yellowish rock. Sulphur, probably. The moon must have been quite volcanic at some time. She wished she could just walk into the frame and look.

Everyone else on the team was already at the dig, she saw. Standing in the centre of a large cave mouth, Irving Braxiatel seemed happy enough. He was wearing – by his standards – the scruffiest possible clothing. It made him look like Phineas Fogg. Vega the Dig, large-eyed and furry, was operating some sort of machine in the cave behind him.

The sedentary figures of Proth, the CGI dweeb, and Hahn, the archivist, were looking around with interest. A couple of techies were conducting some kind of scan, while Mallory, always one to get involved in everything, had replaced his trademark skip hat with a hardhat to chisel away at a rock face the old-fashioned way. There was one other woman there: blue skin, a face Benny didn't recognise. She must be the local representative.

Watching just wasn't good enough. She switched off the viewer.

The show was running in a viewing alcove in the crew's bullpen, separating the flight deck from the passenger sections. Off-duty stewards could drape their uniform blazers over chairs here, and kick back with a coffee. The co-pilot and flight engineer had come through to watch as well. There was, after all, little for them to do up front.

Bellman, the pilot, poked his head through the door. 'Looks like they want to shunt us on to a maintenance port. No need to panic, but no doubt the passengers will want to complain.'

Benny was momentarily excited as she sensed the shuttle move. At last, they were underway. There was a distant clunk, felt by every part of her body that touched a furnishing on the shuttle.

Then they stopped again. Great.

She left her compartment, and went down to the buffet section.

Through the viewport opposite the serving bar, she could see a tubular white construction, like picked-clean bone against the void.

It was a maintenance station: an orbital workshop where shuttles could dock and be worked on. That meant they were here for a while.

Before she could swear, the intercom coughed into life. 'This is the purser speaking,' a middle-aged voice began. It was a male, from the Barnard's colonies, judging by the accent. 'On behalf of Spaceflight Services, I apologise for the inconvenience, but, due to a minor fault with the inertial absorption network, we will be held up for a short delay. Engineers are already boarding to fix this problem, and there is

no danger of any kind. However, Koloppan regulations insist we cannot continue our journey until the matter is seen to.'

For a moment, Benny entertained thoughts of adventure: hijackers taking over the ship, posing as engineers; a single free passenger fighting to thwart them... Which would probably be her, unfortunately. If they were hijacked, she decided she'd take a vote. See if anyone else wanted to have a go. This time she would scream and faint. That could be her job just this once.

But no. Nothing so exciting was happening. Anyway, she'd been there, done that, got the vest.

The voice was continuing. 'This delay should be approximately half of one standard Earth hour, and we apologise again for the minor inconvenience.'

Minor. Bastards. Trying to put a spin on it already; implying that it would be churlish to feel like complaining about a delay that wasn't major. One half hour! When she should be on a televised dig!

Bastards, but clever bastards; she'd give them that.

She turned to return to her compartment, and winced. A viewer above the serving bar was displaying the HoloCast, and in the process reminding her of what she was missing.

An hour had passed before the call came in from the team on the Koloppan moon. A harried-looking Irving Braxiatel appeared on the monitor that was embedded in the seat-back that faced Benny.

'Professor Summerfield.' He smiled. 'Bernice...' His eyes widened slightly, no doubt taking in her surroundings. 'You're still on the shuttle?'

'Yes.'

'Why haven't you disembarked yet?'

'Because it's a very long walk from the LaGrange stations to the surface and I can't hold my breath that long.'

'Ah. Sarcasm. Excellent. But simply saying that you hadn't landed would have sufficed.' He glanced at something in his hand. 'I don't have a delay listed for your shuttle; has something gone wrong?'

'We've docked at some maintenance station to fix some "minor" fault.'

'How long are you delayed?'

'I don't know. They say half an hour, but that was an hour ago.'

The tone of Braxiatel's next word implied a curse, but, if so, it wasn't one Benny recognised. That in itself was impressive; she could swear in at least a hundred languages. He looked out of the transmission field for a moment. 'Bernice, without you here, we don't have any academic clout. We've already started the HoloCast. It's too late to stop it now. Not without considerable embarrassment and

expense, anyway.'

That was true. The research design had been drafted and approved months ago, for these dates. All the relevant permissions from the Koloppan government had been signed, for these dates. The Koloppan exoarchaeologist responsible for writing up the reports afterwards had been hired and paid, for these dates. It would be difficult, at best, to reassemble the same dig crew and Holo crew at anything other than these dates.

'Well,' she said, 'it's not as if we can fake it...'

Braxiatel remained silent.

'Is it?'

Something about his silence had tripped alarm bells in her head.

'Have you got a camera with you?' he asked.

Another hour slipped past, keeping to the shadows and trying not to be noticed. Benny had it caught in a spotlight all the same; every minute of it.

She had spent most of it rooting around in her kitbag, examining the large viewport in her compartment. The business of actually doing something positive had largely kept her from thinking too much about what a stupid idea it was.

Right. The camera was mounted on a suction cup on the wall, the viewport was set to its widest possible view... It was big enough to provide a starscape background. What more did she need? Even regular space travellers usually couldn't tell one patch of sky from another, unless there was something of particular interest in it.

Nebulae, black holes and so forth were identifiable, but distant specks on black were distant specks on black. If she got the angle right, the viewers shouldn't be able to tell the difference between the view out of the shuttle window, and the sky on the Koloppan moon.

Doubtless some anal-retentive smartarse would pick up on the continuity glitch later, but by that time it'd be too late, someone would have thought of an explanation. And that didn't have to be her, so...

She switched on the viewer, mute, and put in an earpiece to listen to the show. It wouldn't do to have any sound feeding back into her transmission.

'Are you ready?' she asked herself, filling in as her own floor manager. 'Yeah, I am. Ready. Ish.'

Vega the Dig held out the – well, whatever it was – in his furry, clawed paws. 'Look at this, Professor,' he boomed, in plummy tones.

Benny reached out to take it from him, making sure she looked really interested.

The online editor was sharp, switching feeds with the fluidity of an

expert juggler. The viewers would have seen, to all intents and purposes, Benny take the find from Vega the Dig.

The find in Benny's hands... wasn't. It was a hologram, floating at the level of her palms. She could see it and examine it as closely as if it were really there, but she couldn't feel it. She couldn't feel the age of it, the care that had gone into making it. She couldn't feel the history.

It took every ounce of willpower she had not to crush her hands into fists. They'd only have passed through the insubstantial image anyway. She had never been this frustrated; she was missing out on the most exciting dig in years, and nobody would believe it if she complained to them about it. Which would also incur legal action from Braxiatel, as he had pointed out in the short non-disclosure agreement he had downloaded to her.

If she was the sort of person who smashed crockery... Well, that would have made her a very bad archaeologist.

She kept her hands still, gritted her teeth, and screwed her eyes shut. Her face was off camera, but she had to take a moment to compose herself before speaking. People could tell mood and expression from an unguarded tone of voice.

In the crew bullpen, Benny's appearance had provoked a great deal of interest. And not just because she was considered reasonably attractive by a fair proportion of humans and several odd little things with tentacles.

'Okay, so, this must be an impostor,' Kreel was saying. He was short, dark haired, and in charge of catering.

'What?' That was Bellman. He had nothing to do now either.

Kreel waved at the hologram. 'Well, Bernice Summerfield is in compartment 15A, right? So there's two possibilities. One, this show's prerecorded -'

'But she's been aboard nearly two days, and the tall thin one just mentioned last night's lottery numbers.'

'- or the Professor Summerfield they've got on the show is a fake. Wouldn't take much to CG her likeness over a stand-in. They've already said they've got a CGI guy down there for the infobursts. Hell, everybody on the show could be artificial.'

'Never trust the media,' Flight Engineer Carruthers said with a grin.

'Exactly.' Kreel nodded.

Bellman shook his head. 'Look, man; it's only a minority interest show. What's the big deal about whether that's really Summerfield or not?'

'Because it's our tax money that's funding the environmental systems, transport to the site, and all that crap. The Culture Ministry is

to get a shake-up and a pay rise from our income tax, on the say so of these guys. So if they're not for real, we could be looking at a massive fraud.'

'You're paranoid, Kreel.'

'Yeah, so?' He struck a Rush tab to his neck, and leaned back in bliss for a moment. 'I say we show them up.'

Carruthers looked baffled. 'What do you mean, "show them up"?''

'Blow their cover. Transmit the truth, know what I mean? Get one back at the government. That'd show them how to waste our tax credits.'

'I think they've always known how to do that,' the Chief Engineer murmured.

'Hey,' Purser Bolland said, making his first foray into the conversation. 'You think she knows?'

Everyone on the flight deck looked at him, surprised by his contribution.

'Knows?' Kreel asked.

'Professor Summerfield. I mean, she's sitting back there in Business Class... D'you think she knows they're using her name and likeness? I mean, if somebody claiming to be me showed up on a HoloCast, and I knew it wasn't me, I'd be madder than hell. Wouldn't you?'

'Yeah,' Kreel agreed slowly. A calculating expression crossed his face, not improving it at all.

It was going very well. The online editors had tweaked things to make it look like she was right there with Braxiatel. Millions of viewers were happy. Nothing could go wrong. She'd pop into the shuttle's tiny bar, get a drink, and get back to the camera for the next act. What could be simpler?

Herding moths. There's a thought; herding moths. *One Sentient and His...* Hmmm? What sort of animal *would* you breed for that? The door to the bar was practically jammed shut with the amount of people in it.

Obviously hers was a popular idea. About half the passengers were in there, and half of those had at least an eye or two on the big screen above the drinks supply.

She was looking down on them.

Benny blinked, and watched herself appear to examine something else Vega the Dig had just unearthed from the lunar dust. There was obviously some kind of transmission delay. Or else they were showing this scene as a repeated highlight.

The buffet steward was looking at her. 'That was you on the screen...' He frowned. 'I thought this show was live?'

'So did I.' She grinned, suddenly, putting on all the charm she could muster. 'And it's so odd, isn't it? Still, she's there, I'm here... So it

couldn't possibly be me.'

'She had your name. Or are there two Professor Summerfields?'

Was that a sceptical tone in 'Professor'? Or just her imagination?

'I suppose there must be. And I have been cloned so many times, I've simply lost track. But she's an archaeologist, quite a well known one, actually, and I'm a Professor of... Biotechnetics.' She took her drink, and a fistful of snacks, and turned away before he could say anything else.

People were beginning to drift into buffet section as Benny was trying to get out, so obviously there was a consensus that the journey was not about to end in the near future. A few of them looked at her with that vague expression that meant they wanted to ask why she seemed familiar. That meant they were probably watching the show.

She got out of the door at high speed.

A couple of Spaceflight Services engineers wandered past Benny as she returned to her compartment.

When she had heard the announcement about engineers coming aboard to fix the 'minor' fault, Benny had imagined the fearless, hardworking fixers who would bust a gut to get things done fast and done right. The old 'failure is not an option' attitude that kept the final frontier expanding.

Imagination was one thing, but she knew all along what she would really see: a couple of bored grease-monkeys more interested in a forthcoming zero-g jetball fixture than in whatever their jobs actually were. Sometimes Benny loved being right about things, but, at times like this, she would have loved to have been as far wrong as was humanly possible.

A trio of stewards were waiting outside her compartment when she got back. She couldn't tell what ranks they were, even though they wore some sort of insignia. The oldest and meatiest one wore a name-tag reading 'Bolland'. The shortest read 'Kreef and the last read 'Carruthers'.

'Professor Summerfield? The archaeologist?' Bolland asked. It was the voice she'd heard over the intercom.

Hi, lying git, she wanted to say, but she knew it probably wasn't his fault. Most likely he didn't know any more about the cause of the delay – or the length of it – than she did. And he'd read her passport details, so he definitely had one up on her here.

'Yes... Is there some problem?' It would be just her luck if whatever it was that had caused this excruciating delay turned out to be in her compartment. An alien artefact containing the souls of a billion dead, crying out for vengeance. That sort of thing.

'Well...' Now that she'd answered, the Purser seemed almost

embarrassed to have disturbed her. 'There's no problem. There's just... a transmission we thought you ought to know about. May we come in?'

She could see it coming, then. The feeling was one she'd had watching avalanches and mudslides on several worlds: inevitability incarnated. They knew. They'd found her out. About the HoloCast, at least. She had one of the flashes that sometimes assailed her; hearing someone question her about her academic qualifications; past a telling note into the voice when saying 'Professor.' Even though she was a real one now. It was always with her.

She realised she was hesitating, and that they were watching her.

Smart going, she told herself. She opened the door, and walked in, palming the camera from the wall before she switched the light on.

'Come on in.'

'Thank you, Professor.' The steward switched on the viewing alcove, and made a few adjustments. It was showing her part of the broadcast from earlier. Goddess, they'd recorded it?

If Benny had been more embarrassed than this before, she couldn't remember it. Not that that meant much, since embarrassment and memory loss went together like a rather useless horse and carriage.

'Um,' she said. 'That's... I'm sure there's an explanation, and I'll -'

The stewards turned back to face her.

'Bastards, eh?' Kreel said.

'Well, I wouldn't go that far -'

'I mean, we couldn't believe they'd be so twisted as to CG an impostor into an educational thing, but there you are. I mean, there you aren't, but there you are.'

Benny blinked. 'Impostor?'

'Well,' Carruthers said, 'you're here, not on the Koloppan moon, so it must be an impostor or a computer-generated performer. If you'd care to make a complaint to the Culture Ministry, we'll make witness statements.'

She almost made a girlish clap of relief, but decided that would be pushing it. 'An impostor?! Well, the evidence would seem to suggest that. I'm shocked! Does it happen a lot? I don't watch many HoloCasts. Too much travelling.'

'Some say it happens all the time,' Bolland told her. 'It saves paying actors or presenters, I guess.'

'Some say?'

'This is one of the few times I can think of where there's direct evidence. Specifically a confirmation that the person apparently in one place is actually somewhere else.'

The short, dark-haired one, Kreel, was looking out of the view port.

Then at the recording. Viewport, recording, over and over. 'Wait a

minute...'

'What?'

Kreel was looking out at the stars. Stars, planets, constellations; the whole of the wonder of... Benny's thoughts halted there.

Constellations. The crew flew this route all the time. They'd know the local constellations like the backs of their hands.

'This dig thing's on the southern hemisphere of the moon?'

'Yes...'

'So how come the tree-squirrel is visible behind her head? Just at the angle it is off our port side. It should,' he went on, as all the stewards turned to glare at her, 'be on the opposite side of the planet.'

'Bugger,' said Benny.

They remained silent.

'Look,' she said. 'I should be there, but this delay has meant I'm not. We had the choice of either faking it, or losing a lot of money, respect, and embarrassing the local government.' She pulled the little camera from a baggy pocket.

The stewards were all looking at each other. 'She did know,' Kreel said. He sounded depressed. She wondered if she was his equivalent of seeing the zipper on the monster's back?

'Can you help me?' she asked them.

'To lie?' Bolland asked, with an offended tone.

Benny winced. 'To make the best of the situation,' she corrected him. 'To, ah, do the best I can to do my job under the worst possible circumstances. I was coming to Koloppo to tell people about the civilisation that used to live there. I still intend to do that. The knowledge isn't any less because I'm not standing in the spot where I'm supposed to be.'

'There is that...'

'Guys, I'm an archaeologist. It's not just a job, it's who I am. It gives me pleasure. That thrill you get from seeing the nudey HoloCasts is the same one I get when I pick up an arrowhead that hasn't seen the light of day for five thousand years. If this is wrong – and it probably is – then my crime is also my punishment. I'm not going to get to touch those ancient artefacts. I'm not going to enjoy the feel of them, or the smell of the mud, or the –'

'What's in it for us?' Kreel asked.

Walk through a crowded shuttle. It's hot, smelly, with dry air that scrapes the throat and makes you think you're catching the flu. And it probably does give you the flu, Benny thought.

You can hear snoring and the cries of babies. Smell bad food and worse coffee. Know that everybody is either bored stiff or a ticking time bomb of impatience.

In the buffet area, you could see it in their faces, as Benny did. She tried to look nonchalant, as she returned to the serving bar. It was even more crowded this time, every seat occupied by weary and irritated travellers.

The viewer above the bar was showing Vega the Dig pointing out something to Braxiatel. Benny could feel the eyes of many people on her. Hell, she had felt their eyes on her when she was doing her last speech ten minutes earlier. Carruthers had been a pretty good cameraman.

‘Professor Summerfield,’ the barman greeted her. There was a triumphal Bond-villain ‘so, we meet again, old adversary’, in his voice.

‘White wine,’ she said. ‘Chilled.’

Benny wasn’t usually disturbed by crowds, but they were getting awfully tight around her. Pressing up to her, all with the same curious look on their face. How could she be here... and there? Was this some sort of swizz?

She considered violence. And wondered if she could include the barman in it.

The door opened, and Bolland came through. ‘Miss Summerfield,’ he said loudly.

Hearing the name, and knowing it was that of the woman on the HoloCast, the crowd drew back. It was holding its collective breath, waiting for the confirmation of the celebrity scandal it knew was coming.

A crowd of the public, or ordinary Joes... It was like a gestalt wolf, that preyed on the lambs of gossip and rumour.

‘The commercials are nearly finished; your sister’s HoloCast will be resuming in a minute or so. You can watch it in private in the crew room, if you wish.’

‘Thank you,’ she told him. She grinned at the barman, who looked as if a pot of gold in his hand had just turned back into a bucket of worthless pebbles. ‘Keep it on ice, I have to go.’ She glanced up at the screen as she made her way to the door. ‘How beautiful she is,’ she sighed. ‘How does she do it?’

Twelve hours later, Benny stepped on to the makeshift pad a couple of kilometres from the dig. Braxiatel was waiting for her.

‘Glad you could make it.’

‘I’m sorry about the trouble...’

‘Don’t apologise for things that aren’t your fault. Your friends don’t need it, and your enemies won’t listen anyway. Better to save your breath, especially in an atmosphere as thin as this.’

He took her satchel as she hefted her kitbag and started towards the skimmer he’d brought. ‘We’ll start broadcasting Day Two in three

hours. You got enough sleep, I take it?’

‘Nearly. Oh, there’s just one other thing.’

‘Yes?’ He looked at her quizzically, and she got the impression – surely just her paranoid imagination – that he already knew what she was going to say.

She turned, indicating the three off-duty men in Spaceflight Services uniforms. ‘You know how HoloCast companies used to allow visitors on set, and Vega the Dig has always been wanting more help with shovels...?’

10: Beedlemania

By Nev Fountain

The problems all started when they found the ruins on Beedle.

The Knyy'ds claimed ownership of the ruins, assuming them to be a site of one of their sacred battles. The odds were for it, of course.

They were an insanely violent race, and anything in the quadrant which did get discovered in a semi-demolished state, chances were they'd demolished it.

Unfortunately, the Mystic Wizards of Magee's World also staked a claim. They had a suspicion that the ruins were the remnants of a theatre which played host to one of their most powerful Wizards who, according to their most sacred books of Magic, did a summer season there once.

Both were intractable in their belief that they deserved to take the ruins back to their respective museums. Naturally, they had to bring in an arbiter to make a decision about who had the correct claim, and to make sure that decision was an informed one, they required an excellent archaeologist with impeccable diplomatic skills...

The hairy thing was holding a crude card with 'Prodd Senjy Bummersfeeld' scrawled upon it. Benny guessed that meant her, and yomped through the spaceport towards it.

Benny had thought deeply about this assignment, and had dressed carefully to convey the right image; an unsubtle combination of Practical Archaeologist and Impractical Lady Ambassador. She was wearing her best 'cruk-me' shoes, her best 'grope-my-arse-if-you-like-but-you'll-end-upcovered-in-chalkdust' jeans, and she'd had her hair done for only the second time in her life in that posh salon on Kavelron, the one that didn't have puns in its name, where they give you a choice of coffee while waiting, and the only reason the hairdressers ask you about your holidays is to let you know they've been to somewhere more expensive.

The Geronon extended a seven-fingered hand in welcome.

'Prodd Benjy! Lovlee to meet ya at long last!'

'Thank you for asking me, it's a great thrill to be *brrrrrr!*' Benny's gratitude dissolved into a shriek, as her teeth clamped together in shock.

The creature rushed forward and leaned over Benny's recumbent form.

'Jeezo, ya seem to have taken a tumble thar, Benj, lettus help yar

up!

‘Thanks, I don’t know what happened there. I must have had some kind of electric *shhhhhhhkkkk!!!*’

‘Gotcha! Hyok hyok hyok!’

The chuckling creature turned away from Benny’s prone body, and confidentially showed his hand, complete with device strapped into the palm, to a hovering camera which had appeared from nowhere.

‘Y’see, what Benjy dint know is I putta claw buzzer on before I shuck her hand... Let’s havva look at that hilarious footage one more time...’

The creature scuttled off. Benny could hear her own synthesised shrieks disappearing into the distance as his TeeVee ‘bot played it over and over again.

Benny got painfully to her feet, wedging her blistered palms under her armpits. ‘Not the nicest welcome to a new planet...’

‘It could have been worse,’ said a high pitched voice. Benny had been joined by an octopod with a huge single eye in the middle of a bulbous head. It was using half of its tentacles to nurse the other half.

It had obviously been given a similar welcome several times over. ‘The Geramons of Beedle are compulsive pranksters,’ sighed the octopod.

‘Demjely is meant to be their ambassador, greeting the interested parties. On reflection I think it would be best if we greeted them ourselves.’

‘Avoiding nuclear-flavoured diplomatic incidents is a good plan in my book.’

The octopod extended an unsinged tentacle. ‘How do you do? I’m Foogle, assistant to the Arbiter.’

‘I’m Benny. You’re from Alpha Centauri, aren’t you?’

Foogle stiffened. ‘Beta Centauri, actually.’

‘Oh. Sorry. My foot seems to have performed a perfect docking procedure with my mouth.’

The Beta Centaurans were wildly acclaimed as the second-finest Arbiters in the galaxy, after the Alpha Centaurans. Funnily enough, save for a slightly more purplish hue and a few extra tentacles, they looked exactly like the Alpha Centaurans. This was largely in keeping with William Blagg’s theory of parallel evolution, which states that:

‘Where a particular species comes to prominence and becomes integral to the workings of the Universe, there is a strong probability that evolution will produce a suspiciously similar; lesser-well-known race alongside them, to be available in fulfilling a similar role when the greater-well-known race – for whatever reason – isn’t available...’

‘So, you’re assisting the Arbiter, then?’ Benny hurriedly changed the subject.

‘Yes, Ms Summerfield,’ trilled Foogle. ‘It is my job to ensure the Arbiter does not encounter any unpleasantness during the stay. As you can imagine, it has been a particularly trying day for me.’

‘Yes, I can imagine. In Technicolour. Well, at least the Geramons are putting on a bit of pomp and ceremony for the summit.’

Menacing heavily armed guards clattered their way into the spaceport, escorting a rather policy Geramon wearing a huge hat, which looked like a plant pot with a sock stuffed in it. It was the head of Beedle himself, the High Japester.

‘Oh, they’re not here for us,’ said Foogle. ‘You don’t think they would be interested in a situation that has the potential to develop into an interplanetary war, would you? They’re here to pick up the High Japester’s consignment of priceless twentieth-century Jokes and Tricks For All Occasions.’

Benny and Foogle watched the transporter ship open its huge cargo bay doors and start unloading.

They watched as, one by one, packing cases with words such as ‘itching powder’ and ‘black-face soap’ stencilled on them were reverently removed from the transport.

They also watched as one of the Geramon porters irreverently (and quite deliberately) dropped a packing case with the words ‘stink’ and ‘bombs’ stencilled on it.

Benny and Foogle suddenly stopped watching, and hurriedly decided to greet the visiting delegates in *another* part of the spaceport.

It was one of Foogle’s roles to make sure the rules of the summit were observed properly. Unfortunately, the Knyy’ds had obviously seen the ‘no weapons’ rule as one to be observed with their eyes squinted and through thick smoked glass.

J’Kdy’nn of the Knyy’ds leaned over Benny ominously.

‘We cannot give you our sword. Once it is unsheathed, it cannot be returned to its scabbard without being used for the purpose for which it is intended. And that purpose, puny vowel-obsessed human, is to bring forth blood in battle.’

‘Riiiggghht... If you could just sign this undertaking that you won’t bring forth blood while you’re on Beedle, then you can go to your quarters and hang dead animals on the wall, or whatever you lot do for relaxation.’

A large reptilian claw grabbed the proffered pen, pulled the top off, and did an impressive scrawl across the page.

They started to move away. Benny cleared her throat.

‘Erm... I think you’ll find that you’ve still got my pen...’

J’Kdy’nn glared at her. ‘It was you who forced me to remove the top of your pen. The rule about swords covers all sharp objects. Every

time a Knyy'd opens a cutlery drawer, before closing it we have to cook a nice vegetable Frr'y'd for the wife.' He nodded back to a Knyy'd behind him. 'On the way here, P'ryd here had to run with scissors for hours before he could find a newspaper to cut into snowflake shapes. As for this,' he held up the biro, 'it cannot be sheathed until I write a letter home to my mother.' J'Kdy'nn's eyes blazed. 'And as I have already written to her three times this week, this does not bode well for my mood in the forthcoming negotiations.'

The representative of Magee's world wasn't best pleased either.

'I tell you, zis is a vaste of time...' the Great Alfredo said for the fourteenth time, as he was searched for the fifteenth time, after making the metal detector go 'bleep-bleep-bleep' for the sixteenth time.

The searches had so far produced three kilometres of coloured silk handkerchiefs, an entire flock of white flying creatures that took great delight in excreting over the surrounding area, a floppy-eared mammal, and two undergarments of an intimate nature which belonged to Benny.

As the flying things (attracted to Foogle's fishy odour) were trying to take chunks out of it whilst the long-eared mammal was nibbling the forms on its desk, Foogle was faced with the most difficult dilemma faced by any bureaucrat: to save itself or its paperwork?

Luckily, being a bureaucrat of the eight-armed variety, it was doing a fair job of both. 'This is a most undignified position to be in!' it squeaked.

'Yes, well... I don't think your position is quite as undignified as the Great Alfredo's.'

The Great Alfredo was completely naked now. The metal detector was still beeping, and one of the security 'bots was strapping on a rubber glove. From somewhere could still be heard the sound of muffled cooing.

'Ow, watch where yer puttin' those bleedin' claws!' the Wizard yelled, his accent magically vanishing as the 'bot's metal talons probed their way into the Great Alfredo's personal magic cabinet. 'I can assure you, I really do have *nuzzink* up my sleeve!'

After what seemed a *very* long time, the 'bot pulled something out: a two-dimensional figure that unfurled itself, grinned the shiniest of grins, and assumed a smiley pose.

'Well that explains it,' said Benny. 'It's a Smamfa.'

'A Smamfa?'

'A genetically engineered magician's assistant. They splice and amalgamate the DNA of big pink feathers and sequins. That's must be what the detector picked up.'

The Smamfa flourished a sparkly hand, a little tinny fanfare trilled out from nowhere, and the Mystic Wizard gave a great sweeping bow.

‘You’d think,’ said Benny, ‘that the Great Alfredo would be tired of holding that pose.’

The delegates and Benny had been safely tucked away in a nearby hotel. Foogle’s quarters were on the Arbiter’s ship, and Benny joined it for a nightcap. After a couple of rather nice jolts of Beta Centauran spirit (slogan: ‘very nearly as good as Alpha Centauran spirit’), she yawned and stretched. ‘Right, if I’m going to be in a ditch tomorrow, I’d better have an early night.’

‘I do hope your archaeological findings are conclusive, and don’t prompt a difficult decision. The Arbiter is not keen on difficult situations.’

‘I can imagine.’

Beta Centaurans were incredibly highly strung, which was seen as a positive trait. The more nervous the Centauran, the more highly they were regarded by the Centauran race. The Arbiter was one of the most senior octopods on Centauri, so Benny guessed that saying ‘boo’ to any aquatic fowl wasn’t amongst its official duties.

Benny made her way out of the ship, passing by what looked like a highly impregnable door to the Arbiter’s quarters, guarded by two fearsome looking security ‘bots.

Did she just hear a noise then?

Something that reminded her of someone. ‘Dorotheé?’

No, she must have imagined it.

Benny was heading back from the luxuriant hotel bathroom, towel slung over one shoulder, big furry Aggedor slippers flapping down the corridor, when she caught sight of her face in a mirror. It was filthy.

Covered in a strange black substance.

She stared at it. ‘Bloody Geramons!’

Then she heard *another* faint noise.

She looked around.

No one there.

Or so it seemed. But Benny knew better.

She stayed still in the shadows, and watched as the Smamfa peeled itself from the side of the wall (it had blended in perfectly with the rather vulgar wallpaper) and crept up the corridor. Benny followed.

The Smamfa headed out to the spaceport, and towards the Arbiter’s ship, slipping easily past the guards and up the gangway.

Benny waited for what seemed like an age for it to come out, staring at the fat ship until black splodges swam into her vision.

She was just about to tell the guards that their carefully prepared

security systems had been infiltrated by a creature that was designed only to step out of a big box and smile prettily when she noticed the Great Alfredo standing by one of the photo booths in spaceport's reception area.

He drew the curtain of the booth aside with a quiet flourish, and there was the Smamfa, assuming a smiley-pretty pose as best as she could, as she was carrying a box under her arm.

There was the tiniest of tinny fanfares, and they both swept back to the residential quarters.

Benny stifled a yawn. 'God, my eyes must be tired...' The black splodges were almost overpowering now, swirling all around her.

And then one of them *did* overpower her.

And everything went black.

The next day didn't start well for Foogle.

Benny had been meant to examine the ruins first thing in the morning, and present an initial report to Foogle, who would give it to the Arbiter to examine.

Only she was nowhere to be seen.

The report was important as it was the basis on which the Arbiter would conduct the initial meeting between the Mystic Wizards and the Knyy'ds.

Only the Knyy'ds were also nowhere to be seen.

Under intergalactic law, the Arbiter should call the initial meeting void, and reconvene the meeting for another time.

Only the Arbiter was nowhere to be seen either.

The Great Alfredo crossed his arms, and leaned back in his chair.

'It eez normally that *I* do ze disappearing act,' he said. 'If no one's interested in ze ruins any more, I'll just pack zem up myself and take zem home, s'okay?'

Foogle was getting frantic. It was unthinkable. An Arbiter from Beta Centauri missing a negotiation? Never in the history of the universe. Unless...

Foogle got more frantic.

The next day didn't start well for Benny, either.

She woke up. She had been dumped in a shadowy corner of the spaceport. Her dressing gown was almost as filthy as her face. She felt the back of her head, and encountered an ugly swollen lump under a scalp matted with blood.

She staggered to her feet, and scooped up the pile of small change that commuters had thrown at the feet of her unconscious form. 'Very generous too. I think I owe it to all the shambling vagrants in the universe to spend every last penny of this on booze.'

She was about to head back to the hotel, when she blearily

registered the riot of security 'bots and 'Do Not Cross' signs outside the Arbiter's ship.

'Where have you been?!' Foogle squealed. Its body was a stripy rainbow of worried colours. Benny was reminded of the time she had visited Earth in the 1970s. Foogle looked exactly like a huge version of the Zoom ice-lolly she had bought from an ice cream van. 'The Arbiter has been killed!'

They were standing in the Arbiter's quarters. The white room was completely bare, save for two pieces of furniture and a corpse. There was a chair, upon which was slumped the lifeless body of the Arbiter, its huge head lying face down on the desk. 'I do not understand how this could have happened! Could it be natural causes?'

'Bit inconvenient if it is...'

'But this room has been constructed by our finest craftsmen with every device and sensor to facilitate the comfort and protection of the Arbiter! It has everything... Nukeloid-proof walls... Chrono-displacement shielding which throws the room ten seconds into the past in the event of an attack. It *even* has the new Anti-Barrie multi-focused lighting system that completely eliminates any form of shadow. The Arbiter was never very keen on his own shadow.'

'Well, this must be the ultimate "locked room" mystery.'

Foogle shook its huge head. 'I don't understand it, Benny, there's just no motive as far as I can see. Who would kill a poor defenceless octopod?'

'Sushi chefs?'

'That's not a very tasteful remark, Benny.'

'Sorry. Sometimes my humour's so dark bats get lost in it. Have the Geramons found anything?'

'Not yet. Luckily they do have this thing called an "Occuloid sensor".' Foogle brandished a large camera-like machine with a huge round aperture. 'You can look through it and scan for heat traces, and would you believe it? It's designed specifically for Beta Centaurans!'

Foogle demonstrated, holding it up to his eye, and scanned the room. 'But I can't seem to see anything with it.'

'Um. Foogle...'

'Either it's too sensitive, or not sensitive enough.'

'Neither I think...'

'Perhaps it could be broken.'

'No, Foogle,' said Benny. Despite the pain romping around her skull, she had to contort her face into a stony mask to stop collapsing in giggles. She pulled out a hand mirror from her bag. 'As the as the Geramons are concerned I think it's working perfectly.'

Foogle looked in the mirror. There was a huge inch-thick trail of

black ink, forming a perfect circle around the octopod's eye.

Benny could distinctly hear a 'Gotcha! Hyok hyok hyok!' floating down the corridor.

'This is *beyond* an insult!'

'Well you've got to look at it from the Geramons' point of view,' said Benny. 'It's not often they get the opportunity to do the biggest black-eye gag in the Universe.'

Benny told security what she'd seen the previous night, and the Great Alfredo was hauled in for questioning.

The accent had performed its vanishing trick again. 'Why would I want to kill the Arbiter? It ain't done me any harm! I done nothing! You got nothing on me!'

'We have a witness that saw you outside the Arbiter's ship,' the security 'bot grated wearily. 'And saw your Smamfa go on board said ship and remove an item from it.'

'Oh right, maybe I did *something*...' Alfredo's shoulders sagged. 'It's a fair cop. We 'ad a notion that there was something on the ship that would help us keep the Knyy'ds out of action for a while, stop 'em turnin' up to the negotiations, so we could persuade the Arbiter we should 'ave the ruins.'

'And this thing was?'

They finally found the Knyy'ds, in their quarters. A security 'bot had to break down the door, and found a room full of twisted bodies.

Twisted, living, annoyed bodies.

'Sabotage and treachery!' bellowed J'Kdy'nn, his entire body stretched out painfully across the floor. 'Those conniving top-hatted fakirs will pay for this!'

The Mystic Wizard had left what he'd got from the Arbiter's ship outside the Knyy'ds rooms: an unmarked box containing a set of Centauran Twister.

They'd been playing it for over eleven hours now. The game showed no sign of ending, and as it really required participants with eight arms to play it, the Knyy'd's were doing themselves no end of serious mischief. 'We have no choice, it is a matter of honour!' yelled J'Kdy'nn, in some pain. 'The box contained a pointed object! That thing you twirl which tells you what colour you have to get to! Once we had opened the box, we had to use it for its intended purpose!'

J'Kdy'nn spun the little pointer, and the dial read 'Middle Right Tentacle – Green.'

'*Ghaaahh!*' he roared.

A huge medical ship arrived and took the Knyy'ds home.

'It seems odd that they have dropped their claim to the ruins,' said

‘The High Japester?’

‘Fifty points to the octopod.’

There was a huge ‘whoosh’ from the other side of the spaceport.

Benny and Foogle ran outside and stared as the Presidential transport rose up in a flower of flame and headed for the skies.

Benny shielded her eyes. ‘The Geramons let him get away!’

‘Geramons may like the odd prank, Benny, but I don’t think they’d approve of their ruler luring half the galaxy to their planet to try out his new toys.’

‘Yukkan say that agin!’ Demjely was suddenly at their elbow, giving his nasty little chuckle. ‘Y’see, we buggd the Arbiter’s office and hear what you sed!’ He addressed his TeeVee ‘bot. ‘And what the japester dint know is we putta nukular bomb onbord before he got onna ship...’

There was another, bigger flower of flame in the sky.

‘Gotcha. Hyok hyok hyok!’ Demjely turned to Benny. ‘Tanks forra helping us becum tha new Japester, Benjy, ya okay-dokey with the Geramons in my book.’ Demjely shook Benny’s hand.

The electrical charge from Demjely’s hand buzzer was bypassed by Benny’s insulated glove, carried down the insulated wire concealed under her jumper, went up her right arm, across her shoulders, down her left arm and into her other insulated glove, which she’d just slapped heartily on Demjely’s back.

Demjely suddenly found himself several feet away, sliding down a wall, his blackened fur standing on end and giving off little puffs of smoke. Benny turned to Foogle and wagged her eyebrows. ‘Gotcha! Hyok hyok hyok!’

11: The All-Seeing Eye

By Justin Richards

I, the all-seeing, failed only once in my observations. But the physician returned to the Inn, and the second time I marked him well.

He left the Inn on his journey, and did not again return for ninety-nine days.

But when he returned I was waiting for him.

It was refreshing to get back to real archaeology, Benny thought. Good to be working with a small team of people who really knew what they were doing. Terrific to be up to your ankles in mud, uncovering the tangible past.

Actually, that wasn't altogether true.

She rubbed her palms together in an attempt to remove some of the ingrained dirt. She could see the pores in her skin: tiny dark dots. The muddied lines on her hands made patterns that crossed and crisscrossed.

Excavating an old coaching inn was hardly the pinnacle of historical achievement. It wasn't going to reveal anything startling.

She was ashamed of herself for thinking it, but this was *just* archaeology.

And while Crackton and Galt were indeed experts, that didn't mean they were the most stimulating company. Stanislaw Galt was probably in his forties, but he behaved more like an old woman than Cynthia Crackton did. He seemed to spend his whole life in a haze of depression.

Cynthia was waiting for Benny at the Work Area. She smiled weakly, her wrinkled face cracking with the effort. She never complained about how stiff her joints had become, or how her sight was failing. But every movement, every twinge was evidence enough of her frailty.

Benny had once made the mistake of asking her what she was most looking forward to. 'My dear,' Cynthia had replied in her creaking, dusty voice, 'when you get to be my age and in my condition, you're really only looking forward to one thing.'

'Found something?' Benny asked her now, trying to muster some enthusiasm. 'Another post hole? Evidence of the original foundations perhaps?'

'Galt has found something.' Cynthia said stiffly. 'Called in on the thingummy. He sounded quite excited.'

'I wish I'd heard that,' Benny said. 'I can't imagine him being

excited about anything.'

Cynthia was staring past her, eyes watery and unfocused. 'Tell me,' she said, 'who is that woman?'

The woman was standing on the other side of the excavation.

Incongruous and alone. Even at a distance, Benny could tell she was startlingly beautiful, with long black hair that hung over her shoulders. She was wearing a dress completely unsuited to the environment: long and red, trimmed with lace.

The woman raised her arm and gestured, beckoning.

'I think she wants to talk to us,' Cynthia said.

'To you,' Benny told her. Somehow she knew that it was Cynthia the woman was beckoning. 'Come on.'

They picked their way across the wooden boards, watching their feet for fear of slipping. Benny helped Cynthia over the more tricky bits. Before long they reached the slight rise where the woman had been standing. The ground was damp and muddy. There were no hoards here.

And the woman was gone.

On his way back to the City, the young physician arrived by coach, and again entered the Inn. It was late afternoon and the shadows were already tall, as they are at that time in winter.

The landlord was a large, loud man who gave him the same room as he had had before; and before that, although he did not remember.

Out of courtesy, the physician accepted the ale the landlord offered.

He sat by the fire, hoping it would free the chill from his bones and the ice from his heart.

The lady came down and sat with him. The fire warmed her face and his ale. Like him she was breaking her journey. She asked what he did in life and he told her.

'I have not stayed here before,' she said, 'have you?'

'Once, several months ago.' He could not remember his first visit, for he had been a child at the time. Still suckling his mother, and very frail. He had almost died there, but he did not know it.

Galt was in what they had decided must have been the main room of the inn. He was crouched down, peering into a narrow hole in a crumbling wall of fire-blackened stonework.

'If you stoop down,' Galt told them, moving aside, 'you can just see what looks like...'

'A roll of paper,' Benny said in surprise. 'Or parchment.'

'Why haven't you removed it?' Cynthia asked him caustically.

'I was waiting for you.' He blew out a long emphatic breath. 'I don't know why I bother. Nobody appreciates it when I try to help. In fact nobody –'

‘Yes we do,’ Benny told him. ‘Don’t we, Cynthia?’ She knew better than to pause for the answer. ‘But let’s get it out and have a shufti.’

‘A what?’ Cynthia asked, successfully distracted from berating the unfortunate Galt.

‘It’s an old academic term,’ Benny told her. ‘It means we’ll make a detailed analysis of the available evidence.’

‘Don’t all rush to congratulate me, will you?’ Galt muttered.

Benny reached through the narrow gap, her fingers brushing the brittle edge of the paper. ‘Ah, that’s it.’ She smiled in triumph and pulled her hand back. But now her fist was too big to return through the hole. With a shower of archaeologically priceless stone fragments, she finally managed to extract the roll of parchment. It was tied with a faded red ribbon. She undid the bow.

Cynthia was peering down her nose through glasses she did not have. ‘My dear, I haven’t the faintest idea what you are talking about.’

‘I have,’ Galt said sulkily. ‘But nobody asks me.’

‘And I haven’t the faintest idea what this is talking about,’ Benny said. She turned the parchment so they could see. ‘It’s in Latin. Or Greek. Or possibly Double-Dutch.’

‘Latin,’ Cynthia sighed.

‘I could have told you that,’ Galt said.

Benny smiled. ‘Latin, eh? Good. Thought so. Now we just need someone to translate it.’

Cynthia and Galt exchanged sympathetic glances. Cynthia reached for the parchment, but Galt beat her to it.

‘I don’t suppose you will trust my translation,’ he huffed. ‘But I found it, so –’

‘Really, young man, I think that you’ll find my qualifications are –’

‘Let him do it,’ Benny cut in.

Galt gave a curt nod of thanks and set off towards his quarters.

‘I shall have to check it thoroughly when he’s finished, you know,’

Cynthia said, louder than was strictly necessary. If Galt’s shoulders seemed to droop slightly at her words, she did not appear to notice.

As they talked, and the logs burned deeper, the landlord brought the lady’s wine. As he gave her the glass, the landlord’s hand held it for a second too long, and it was then the physician realised that the lady was beautiful.

She had long hair, which sparkled in the firelight it was so richly dark, and hung below her shoulders. Her face was a perfect heart, with eyes like deep emeralds above her narrow cheekbones. The lashes were long, and the brows narrow, and her lips were full and red. Her dress was of scarlet velvet, with white lace at the arms and neck. It was close about her narrow waist and full bosom and in the

flickering light it seemed to change shade and tone as quickly as an eye can blink. In the simplicity of the Inn room, furnished only with wooden tables and chairs and overlooked by the staircase and the doors to the chambers above, such complex beauty was out of place. He saw her beauty, and he was dead to it.

‘Are all your patients women?’

Her question startled him. ‘Not all, but many.’

‘And do they want only to be told they are well, or ill? Do they have no use for your treatment, for your delicacy of touch, other than in a medicinal manner? Or perhaps to them it is medicine?’

He did not answer, and she moved her chair warmer to his. The fire was glinting in her fulgent eyes.

‘I have not been well myself. Perhaps I need your medicine; your attention. Can your treatment encompass even me?’ She laid her long hand on his shoulder. He flinched as if burned, and the fire in her eyes went out.

‘I am tired,’ he said. ‘I hope you will excuse me.’ He stood and walked slowly to the stairs. Above him he could hear the serving girl talking to the maid. Then the door above opened and the maid and serving girl came out, still talking.

As he lay in bed, awake as ever, he heard again the words the serving girl had said: ‘I pray I shan’t be sick again. I am most mornings now.’

And he wondered who was treating her. He closed his eyes and saw the face and form of the lady in all its mysterious perfection. And then that of the serving girl: the wide smiling mouth and the fair hair. She was pretty and about sixteen. How old the lady was he could not guess.

The lady remained before the fire, watching the girls tidy and listening to the landlord getting noisily drunk. Then she retired to her room, and undressed in front of the long mirror. She piled her clothes on the chair, and her jewellery by the cards. The Hanged Man lay face-up.

Benny pulled Galt gently backwards in his chair. His head lolled sideways as she did so.

Beside her, Cynthia put her hand to her mouth. ‘Poor man,’ she breathed. ‘I thought it was taking a long time.’ She leaned closer. ‘A heart attack, you think?’ Her voice became a murmur. ‘Why should he be so lucky?’

There were no marks on the body. And the door had been locked from the inside.

‘He was all right an hour ago.’ Benny said. ‘I could hear him.’

Cynthia frowned. ‘Hear him?’

‘Yes. Talking.’

'Talking? To whom?'

'To himself, I suppose.' Benny had come to see what progress Galt was making. She had heard his voice, and smiled at the thought of him reading his translation back to himself. She'd stood outside the door, ear pressed to its cold metal surface, straining to pick out the words. But she had heard nothing distinct. 'I was just passing.'

'What should we do with him, do you think?'

'Well, the supply shuttle's due tomorrow. We could just leave him here.'

Cynthia nodded. 'On his bed perhaps? That might be... appropriate.'

'Perchance to dream,' Benny agreed quietly.

It was a bizarre struggle, tipping the chair backwards and rolling the body off. But eventually Galt was slumped sideways on the bed.

'Now,' Cynthia said, breathing heavily from the exertion of watching Benny do most of the work, 'let's see how he was getting along.' She caught her breath. 'That's odd.'

Benny was looking down at Galt on the bed. His eyes were closed, as if he were merely sleeping. He looked more relaxed and composed than Benny could recall. But that was not what held her attention.

There was a hair on the pillow. It was black, like Galt's own hair.

Only it seemed finer. She caught it between her thumb and forefinger.

It was almost a metre long.

'That's odd,' Benny said, and realised that Cynthia had just said the same thing.

'What is?' they both asked.

Benny held out the hair. 'A visitor?'

'The door was locked, remember. Which makes it even more peculiar...' Cynthia paused to wince at the effort of turning back to the desk. '...that the document which Galt was busily translating, and from which I see he has made, just as I thought, some rather inept notes...'

'Yes?'

'Is gone.'

The physician rose from his bed at the sound of the footfall outside his room, and went to the door. He opened it as silently as he could. From the gallery along past his bedchamber, one could look down into the main room. By the banisters stood a table, level with the top of them, and perhaps positioned solely for this moment.

The serving girl stood on the table looking down over the rails.

Again he heard her voice within his head, as she turned towards him, the silhouette of her full figure visible through her nightdress. She looked at him, and he saw into her eyes, and he knew. She had

realised what he had deduced at once.

She turned back towards the drop, and as he leapt out from his doorway to pull her away from the edge, she flung herself forwards with a strange, purposeful movement, a triumphant gesture.

Below, awakened by her cry, the landlord pushed his arms away from beneath his bowed head and looked up. He saw the girl fall; he saw the physician above her, his arm stretched out as she hit the floor.

As the blood pooled from her smashed head, sliced open on the wooden edge of a sharp table, he knew that the physician had pushed her.

The light was fading as Benny peered again through the narrow gap in the stonework. She did not expect to find anything. But it seemed worth a look to see if there was another document hidden in the same place.

She knew at once that what she could see was the *same* rolled document, replaced exactly where Galt had first found it. It was tied exactly as before.

For a moment Benny was sure that she was being watched. She turned sharply. She was still crouched in the excavations, her view limited. The light was fading fast. It was difficult to see anything much apart from the lights in the site buildings.

Maybe it was just an impression, a shape thrown up by the lengthening shadows and the darker corners of her imagination. But she thought she glimpsed someone on the other side of the diggings.

A woman, her long dark hair silhouetted against the grey-black sky.

The physician did not protest when they took him away. He did not challenge the account of the landlord. He saw the smiling fair-haired girl clothed only in her nightdress watching him from the corner of the room as he was led out, and her own body was carried off.

The strange lady turned and went upstairs, almost brushing against the pale figure on the way.

They set the date of the trial, and the gallows were set up ready for the verdict.

The physician's defence depended upon whether he could deny that the unborn child was his. If he could prove that it was not, then less credence might be given to the evidence of the landlord, who had after all been drunk when he saw the girl fall, and barely awake.

But the physician was unable to tell them he was not the father. To tell them why it was impossible would indict him even further. He remained quiet and cold throughout, and the judge from the city donned his black cap and sentenced the physician to be hanged.

As soon as Benny produced the scroll (ta-da!), the weariness lifted

from Cynthia's eyes.

'You don't seem surprised that the scroll was back where we found it,' Benny observed as Cynthia took the scroll and tried to shoo her away.

'When you've lived as long as I have, my dear, nothing surprises you any more.'

Benny nodded slowly. 'You don't need complete silence to work, do you?' she said. 'Only I think that translating that manuscript is a task that requires two people now. One of them being a guard.'

Two hours later, Benny woke up, and felt the pattern of etchings down the side of her face, what you got for falling asleep with your head on your arms.

Something was different. The silence. The silence in the room was terrible.

Oh Goddess!

She leapt up.

She hadn't meant to go to sleep. She hadn't even been tired.

She'd sat down across the table from Cynthia in her quarters, and started with the intention of reading *Archaeology Tomorrow* from cover to cover, while quietly making sure that Cynthia was all right.

She could feel the colour and the blood and the warmth drain from her face. Like she'd been lying on a warm beach and a cold wave had hit her.

'Cynthia?' she yelled. 'Cynthia!'

The old woman was lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling. Benny couldn't see the scroll of parchment anywhere in the tiny room.

Cynthia had keyed her translation on to the screen, and the text was flickering in a window beside a Latin dictionary.

She looked calm and peaceful. Serene. Benny knew she was dead.

Just as she knew at once where the parchment was.

That she would go and fetch it, bring it back here, and try to complete the translation.

Whatever had killed Stanislaw Galt and Cynthia Crackton was inextricably bound up in what they had translated. In what Benny was about to read.

The night before the physician went to the gallows, the lady retired to her room early and set out her cards in a circle on the floor, with the candles. When it was late, she went downstairs to fetch the crucifix from the wall in the main room. She heard the faint cries from below as soon as she stepped on to the landing.

She was halfway down the dim stairs when the maid passed her.

Her fragile face was red even in the half-light, and the tears

glistened on her cheeks as she pulled her ripped chemise together above her torn and disordered skirts. Behind her, the landlord slumped forward over a table, flushed and drunk. The lady took the crucifix from the wall and went back upstairs, closing her door on the sobs from the floor above.

The physician lay awake, hardly noticing the pale figure watching him from the corner of his cell. Another memory was foremost in his mind's eye.

He saw himself in the dimly lit room, the candles round the curtained bed. The parents of the child closed the door as they left him in there for the final examination. He saw himself draw back the curtains and look down at the girl he had tried to keep alive. So young; so quiet; so cold. He lifted her arms from their folded rest over her silent heart, and for the first time as he gazed at her passive face and form, he knew that it was possible to feel desire.

The physician watched as his old self undid the buttons and folded the gown away from her body.

In the corner of his cell, the serving girl closed her pale eyes and leaned her head back as the physician drew the curtains around the body, the bed and himself.

They led him out to the gallows at dawn. As the noose was fitted about his neck, the physician saw his victim smiling at him from the front row.

The landlord stayed at his Inn, nursing his headache, and watching his maid clear the tables furthest away. He looked up as the door opened, and saw the pale figure advancing towards him, the crowd silent behind. As the physician reached him, and he thought the dead had returned for vengeance, the landlord collapsed in a faint.

When he was revived, they told him how the trapdoor beneath the noose had failed to work three times in succession, and that how under the law the physician was free now.

The lady snuffed out her candles at last.

The pale girl watching from the shadows felt cheated, and set upon a new strategy.

Cynthia's room was empty, apart from Cynthia's body. Benny locked the door behind her. She undid the faded ribbon and unrolled the document. Then she angled the screen so that she could read the translation that Cynthia had keyed in.

I, the all-seeing...

'Did you write this?' she asked out loud when she had finished.

'Of course.' The woman's voice was soft and melodious.

She was standing behind Benny, smiling in faint amusement. She was tall and slender, still wearing the red dress. Her eyes were a deep green, sparkling in the light from the screen, and her hair was every bit as dark and rich as Benny had imagined.

‘You came to Galt, didn’t you? And to Cynthia. While they were reading.’

The woman tilted her head slightly to one side. ‘Or did they come to me?’ she wondered. ‘He was so dead to the joy of life. And she was so tired. So very tired.’

Benny would have stood up, but her legs felt cold and numb. ‘Who are you?’ she asked, aware of the catch in her voice.

‘You know who I am,’ the woman said.

That evening, like the first, the strange, beautiful lady and the physician who should be dead sat together before the fire. The lady stared into the flames, while the physician watched as the serving girl leaped towards him from the gallery above, her arms outstretched and her blonde hair blown back. She never reached him for all her desire.

‘Sir,’ said the lady at last, ‘your escape today was not luck, you know.’

‘Providence then.’

‘That neither.’ She leaned towards him, her sweet breath grazing his cheek. ‘Anything is possible, given knowledge.’

‘I have you to thank for the trapdoor’s failure?’ He laughed. ‘Do you possess such knowledge?’

‘I know about you.’

His smile froze. ‘Then you know that you waste your time; and your skill, if such it was.’

‘We shall see,’ she said, and she took his free hand, and raised it to her lips. They burned into his cold flesh and he pulled away. She laughed now. ‘The night is not yet over; there is time for much.’

‘Time for you to die? That is your only hope.’

She smiled again. ‘I will come when you need both my knowledge and my self.’

As soon as the physician entered his chamber he knew that he was not alone. He felt her presence. The pale figure of the dead serving girl was waiting for him, standing by the bed. ‘What do you want?’ he asked her.

‘I want you. I would have had you but for the failure of the trapdoor.’

‘I was not the father.’

Her eyes burned. ‘You should have been. You should have been the father of whatever children. But you were not able. Not when I lived.’

‘And so you died?’

‘I waited for you to return. When we were both dead, then I would have had you. But I was cheated.’

She stepped forward, her hair flashing gold in the light, and raised her hand to his face, and it was cold even against his cheek. ‘I will not be cheated now.’ She walked over to the bed, and stood by it, in the light, pulling the collar of her nightdress open. She reached out with her cold beauty as still he hesitated, and the door opened behind him.

The strip of light fell across the girl’s body like a knife. Her eyes widened in anger as the lady stepped into the room. The physician turned away from the girl, as she cried out in anguish:

‘He is mine!’

‘Not yet.’ The lady turned to the physician. ‘I said you would need me. My knowledge may save you. Accept her now, and you will be hers for ever. As you would have been, had you been hanged today for loving her as she is now.’

He backed away, and the girl turned to the lady. ‘The child must have a father.’

‘It has one somewhere.’

‘No,’ the girl hissed, ‘he must be mine.’

The lady smiled in pity. ‘When you will not even show him what you are? That drunken lecher downstairs was your lover. Claim him for death if you care to.’

The girl looked to the physician, and her eyes begged him for help.

He turned away, and the lady lifted his face to hers. ‘Is that what you want?’ she whispered. And he looked at the pale girl, her arms outstretched towards him, her figure tight against her nightdress.

‘That is not how she is; you know that. You are a doctor, tell me: can she look like that after so long in the ground; after so long without love?’

‘No,’ the physician said, and the girl screamed.

They watched as she writhed, and her form became fainter. The outline of her breasts lost its firmness as her face cracked and blistered. Her hair thinned and her skin wrinkled as the last of her image faded back into the grave. The scream cut out, and a tear slipped from the physician’s eyes. The lady took his hands in hers, and then she leaned forward and kissed him.

And he kissed her

‘I’m not old and tired,’ Benny said. ‘I’m not depressed and ashamed. All right, so some days are better than others. We all have our ups and downs, moments when everything is grey. But you just have to believe things will get better. Look forward to the good times. Look at the view. Have a glass of a good white wine while you chat with your friends. Despite all the pain and suffering and heartache life is good.’

She paused, searching the woman's expression for some hint that she understood.

'Have you never felt like that? That your whole life is stretching ahead of you, and what's happened so far is somehow a prelude to the real thing. That you're on the up, that you're finally getting to where you've always wanted to be.'

The woman was shaking her head: a slow, subtle movement.

'There are days,' Benny went on, 'when you're stuck in the mud, sometimes literally. When you can't see the joy for the dirt. There are days when the universe is against you. There are days when you think you want to curl up and die. But you don't really. You know that you'll meet new people, find new stuff in the old ones, see new things, go new places.'

She wasn't really looking at the woman any more. Her focus was within herself.

'I joke about things, and I'm caustic and sarcastic and I make out like I'm an old cynic. But there's a little girl in here who still wants to rush out and see and do and find everything there is to be witnessed and achieved and discovered. She's called Surprise. Listen, I looked at my hands today. In the ingrained dirt, I could see patterns and textures I'd never noticed. If I have so much in the palm of my hand, then how much more is there that I miss every day in the world? How much beauty and excitement and love is there out there?'

Benny got up and went to Cynthia's body. 'She said that nothing surprised her any more. I hope I never get to that point. I'm just getting going. I'm looking forward to the bad days as well as the good. I used to think I didn't want to be stuck with boring stuff. But as you get older, as you think about things, you realise that *nothing* is boring. That's sort of the point, isn't it? Whatever it's like, and whatever you think, your life isn't humdrum and predictable. And that's what I want, really. Constant amazement, please. Perpetual fascination. A life of...'

'Surprises?' the woman's voice suggested. A soft, gentle susurration.

'Yes,' Benny agreed, looking up, focusing back on the reality around her. 'Yes.'

And apart from herself, the room was empty.

The velvet of her dress caught the light, changing from scarlet to blood red, as it fell. In the room below, the maid stopped her screams and closed her eyes. She gripped tight the table trembling beneath her as her sobbing changed its tone and rhythm.

I watched as the physician took the lady who was me in his arms.

Submitting to her kisses, he fell with her on the gasping bed. So entwined in her beauty was he, accepting it fully, that he failed to find

it cooling around him. His passion rose as never before, so that all his senses became a red blur.

So it was that even as he kissed it, he did not see the face of the beautiful cold lady blend with that of the girl he had watched fall from the gallery.

With me, watching from my distance.

Had he seen that, the physician would have felt the skin of his own face tighten and dissolve into the pale smile of the skull.

As the sobbing reached its peak, and at last I, Death, embraced him.

12: And Then Again

By Robert Shearman

The alarm rang at seven o'clock precisely, as it did every single morning. The two figures in the bed grunted themselves awake, as they did every single morning. Both lay as far apart from each other as possible, with a wall of scrunched up duvet barricading them both.

The barricade wasn't intentional, of course. Both would have told you it was just Something Which Happened. But nevertheless, it was there every single morning too.

Benny rolled over and stared up at the ceiling. Another day at work.

At least it would soon be the weekend. The Company allowed its employees an extra hour in bed at weekends. Benny turned to see that Robin was by now wide awake. They looked at each other for a few moments, working out what to say.

'Whose turn is it to make the coffee?' she asked eventually.

'It's yours, isn't it?'

'If you say so. I can't remember. I can never remember.'

And Benny sighed in irritation, then flashed a smile at Robin quickly to defuse any potential argument. Benny had been forced to practise these smiles quite a lot recently, and was getting quite good at them.

'Well, let's work it out. Today is Thursday, right? And last Thursday I made the coffee. Since we're operating on a seven day per week calendar, and since there are two of us, and since seven isn't divisible by two, I can never make the coffee twice on any consecutive Thursday. So this particular Thursday must be your Thursday. Speaking logically.'

'There's no argument to that.'

And so Robin pulled off the covers, and got to her feet. Benny lay there, just watching. Her hair ran down just past her shoulder, cut to exactly the fashionable style and exactly the fashionable length. It was even highlighted exactly the fashionable shade of off-blonde. Her breasts drooped a little. Her bottom was at that peculiar crossroads between pert and wizened, which depended upon the way she was standing. She stood in several different positions as she yawned herself fully awake, so Benny had ample chance to see it at its most varied.

Benny knew Robin was still quite beautiful, all things considered.

And wondered absently how long it had been now since that beauty had lost its appeal. Since lust had turned to vague revulsion. It didn't

take long to work out. Benny knew the exact date, of course. It had been written down as one of those Especially Significant Moments in the diary kept in the bedroom drawer. And it took less than ten seconds of frowned concentration, as Benny took the present date and subtracted it from the one already recorded, to establish quite definitely that it had been three years, four months and twelve days.

Benny could take particular pride in the speed of that calculation: mental arithmetic was a forte.

‘Is something wrong?’

Robin was frowning hard, and Benny had to flash another of those reassuring smiles. The expressions Benny wore during bouts of arithmetical calculation were quite disturbing to look at, and even after all these years, Robin hadn’t got used to them.

Covering herself with a dressing gown – thank God for that, hide those breasts, hide that shapeshifting arse – Robin stumbled her way down to the kitchen. Benny sighed one last time, and got up. Bleary rubbing of eyes, a little stretch, then straight to the bathroom.

The mirror was a little misted, and Benny had to wipe away a clear space. First brush the teeth, making sure to wipe away the gobbets of toothpaste after they’d been spat into the sink. (Robin always complained if she found them.) Then out would come the razor, and Benny would shave off all the facial stubble that had accumulated in the night. It took a few precious minutes that would be better spent in bed, and Benny had sometimes considered just growing a beard. But as he looked at himself in the rapidly remitting mirror, Benny knew he wasn’t confident enough to change his office image quite as dynamically as *that*. He smiled so he could see his newly whitened teeth, jutted out his newly shaven chin, and sighed.

As Bernard S Summerfield always did.

At five past seven precisely. Every single morning.

Benny parked the car in its designated space, about half a mile away from the office. It was quite a hike from the Outer Reaches of the Office Car Park to the office itself, but Benny wasn’t one to complain.

And he always enjoyed looking at the little fake-silver plaque set against the concrete, showing that this car-parking space was *his* car-parking space, and no one else’s.

Bernard S Summerfield. Known to his close friends as Benny. The problem was, Benny didn’t *have* close friends, not as such. There were those who smiled at him politely when he sat down at the staff table every lunch hour. And there were those – a smaller number – who didn’t make excuses to leave when he did. But none of them called him Benny; indeed, most of these close friends didn’t know his full

name, let alone its diminutive.

Even Robin didn't call him Benny. She made an effort, would excitedly whisper 'Bernie' in his ear. In some ways Bernie was very close to Benny, but in others it was agonisingly wide of the mark, and he always drooped with disappointment when she got it wrong. Robin had learned over the years to whisper it only *after*; never *during*.

But although no one had ever called him Benny, that was how Bernard thought of himself. He didn't know why, and it wasn't something he questioned. It was just One Of Those Things.

At nine o'clock precisely Benny took a seat behind his desk, and took from his briefcase a pen, some paper, and the company's recommended brand of paper clips. Some of the other accountants would have a calculator too, but Benny preferred not to, no matter how disturbing the facial contortions he pulled when trying to work out a particularly tricky sum. These contortions, and the emotions they inspired around the office, explained why Benny's desk was facing a wall. But that was the way Benny liked it too. Catching people's eyes made him nervous. It always seemed like a prelude for a conversation which Benny had no interest in starting, nor any skill in maintaining. Indeed, Benny's ideal working day would be one in which he didn't have to say a word to anyone whatsoever.

Today was not going to be one of those ideal days.

At eleven o'clock precisely, Benny expected to hear the familiar squeak of the catering trolley as it made its rounds through the maze of corridors. Every morning Phyllis would give him a jam doughnut.

That's what he always had. He didn't like Phyllis very much. Nor did he like jam doughnuts. But he knew where he was with both of them.

The eleven o'clock squeak was there, all right, dead on time. But it was accompanied by an unfamiliar footfall. One sprightlier than someone of Phyllis's age, physique or degree of subdued depression could have managed. Benny looked up, and saw that a man of unfashionably short height and unfashionably brown hair was wheeling the trolley instead. Not that the man seemed to care that he was being unfashionable. Worst of all, he was beaming an especially unfashionable smile into the bargain. Benny flinched from the smile instinctively. It made his own carefully rehearsed efforts look so meagre in comparison.

'Mr Summerfield, I presume?' said the strange little man.

'Where's Phyllis?' asked Benny, his voice cracking a little.

'Off sick,' said the man. 'Asked me to take over. Happy to oblige. She told me all about you, Mr Summerfield. Or may I call you Benny?'

Benny stared at the man. The man stared back, still beaming. They

stared at each other for some little while. And when Benny had done staring, he couldn't help but stare some more. The little man didn't even have the grace to be discomfited by this. At length, he laughed.

'She told me jam doughnuts were your favourite,' he whispered, confidentially. 'Well, I've something a little different for you today.'

Benny tried to tell the man he didn't want anything different, thank you very much. He wanted a jam doughnut, and he wanted Phyllis, both in roughly equal tiny amounts. But his jaw was still hanging slightly open, and this slowed him down.

'Here's a surprise for you,' said the little man softly.

And he placed on Benny's desk a rectangular blue box. It was a curious thing, no bigger than the palm of a hand. In spite of himself, Benny peered at it closely.

'Am I supposed to eat this?' Benny heard himself say.

The man chuckled. 'Go on. Look inside.'

'But there isn't a door.'

At that, Phyllis's irritating replacement frowned. And took a close look at the box himself. 'Oh well,' he said at last. 'I'm sure there will be one eventually. You'll just have to be patient. Won't you, Benny?'

And pushing the trolley of cakes and pastries, the man left with a squeak of wheels and a whiff of powdered sugar.

When Benny was quite sure the man wasn't going to come back, he looked back down at the blue box. Now the puzzling little caterer had gone, it didn't seem nearly so mysterious. He turned it over in his hand and sighed. On balance, he thought, he'd really much rather have had the jam doughnut. He popped the box into his pocket and promptly forgot about it, losing himself once more in the world of arithmetic.

It wasn't until he took off his trousers that night that he remembered the blue box. Methodically placing his loose change, keys and wallet in separate piles on the dressing table, he was for a moment at a loss, trying to figure out what this peculiar object was, and into which pile it should be put. He picked it up, and looked at it curiously. To his surprise, it felt warm.

Robin was on the opposite side of the bedroom, hanging her clothes in her own wardrobe, sorting out her change and keys and purse into her own piles on her own dressing table.

'What is that?' she asked.

Benny looked up at her, and had a second to register she was completely naked. He briefly shuddered at the sight of all that flesh, before giving his attention back to the box.

As he did so, he noticed a door. He was certain it hadn't been there that morning. And just as he was considering how to open it – or even

if he *should* open it – the door pulled inwards with a little purr.

‘What have you got there?’ she asked, her intonation as flat as it was before.

Benny didn’t know. He put his finger into the doorway, seeing if he could find... what? Anything? How ridiculous! Nothing there. Of course there wasn’t. He nevertheless raised the door to his face to take a closer look.

‘Let me see.’

He heard that dull voice, but it now seemed a world away.

He couldn’t believe what he saw inside. It was unlike anything he had even dreamed before. If he had even suspected such things had existed, he would never have settled for the bland existence he had endured all these years. No more number crunching. No more toothpaste in the sink, or coffee rotas in the morning. No more Robin.

‘Give it to me,’ said Robin. She sounded much louder now, and he realised with no little horror that that mound of sagging breasts and pinched bottom was right by his side, practically touching him.

Taking away his box. She put it up to her eye. ‘There’s nothing inside.’

He took it back from her. Peered through the tiny doorway once more. And saw that she was right.

‘Come to bed,’ she said. Not coy, nor impatient. Just the same tired neutrality it always was, every single night, at eleven o’clock precisely.

With an unusual degree of recklessness, Benny assigned the little blue box a pile all its very own on the dressing table.

As he climbed into bed, Benny looked at Robin and wondered how long it had been since he loved her. It wasn’t hard to work out. He stopped loving her only two days after he had stopped finding her attractive. So that would be three years, four months and ten days then.

Yes. Right.

It would be her birthday soon, he thought. He’d better propose marriage to her again. After all, it wasn’t as if she’d say yes. He fiddled with the alarm clock.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Robin, surprised.

‘Setting it for 7.05. Give ourselves a few more minutes in bed tomorrow morning.’ And maybe he wouldn’t shave, he thought to himself. See how a beard turned out. As he reached for the light, he glanced at Robin, her mouth still drooped open in vacant astonishment, and was relieved to plunge the room into blackness.

Benny was surprised that he felt disappointed that the blue box didn’t

glow in the dark. He decided to put it out of his head for the moment, It was Not Worth Troubling Over, to be stored with all the One Of Those Things and Something Which Happened's which were the meat of Benny's life.

By morning the box had gone. But that was all right. Because by morning he had forgotten he had ever owned it. And he was left to wonder why the alarm rang at the wrong time, knocking the whole day five minutes out of schedule.

The alarm rang at five past seven precisely, as it did every single morning. The single figure in the bed grunted himself awake. No time to look up at the ceiling any more. The alarm clock didn't leave time for that. Benny didn't know *why* every morning had to be a rush, why he couldn't just set the alarm for – say, seven o'clock, for example – but he had a feeling that it was important. Probably.

He spat toothpaste into the sink, and wiped it away. It was no longer to appease Robin; she had gone long ago. Four years, two months and sixteen days previously, in fact. He'd been a bit surprised. 'You'll never want me to be your wife,' she had told him suddenly. He pointed out he was always proposing to her, once a year, on her birthday, at nine o'clock precisely. 'Precisely.' she had repeated. And left.

Annoyingly enough, it was four years, two months and eleven days ago that Benny had realised he *had* loved Robin after all. At least this way there was no coffee rota to confuse him.

It was his turn now, every day

Benny drove the same car he had driven these past thirty years, and parked it in the very parking space assigned to him when he first joined the Company. (There was a different plaque marking it, though. It now just read 'Summerfield', his bosses having decided once he hit middle age that he was ineligible to display a first name or middle initial.)

Benny sat at the same desk facing the same bit of wall, his face pulling the same contortions as he worked out the same accountancy details.

But the colleagues sitting around him had changed: their predecessors had all been promoted, demoted or shuffled sideways. The new workers did have, however, the same resigned disgust for Benny. So that gave the day some continuity.

And Phyllis had gone too. She had died years ago, or retired. Benny couldn't remember which, but he was sure there had been a memo about it. Rhonda was just as old, just as ugly, and just as dedicated to pushing around a squeaking trolley of doughnuts at eleven o'clock. So

it didn't matter either way.

But today there was no Rhonda. Just a funny little man with a beaming smile. Benny stared at him, and began to remember.

'Rhonda's off sick,' said the little man perkily. 'But she told me all about you, Mr Summerfield.'

'Benny,' he heard himself say.

The man raised an eyebrow. 'If you say so. Rhonda told me what it was you would most desire. Here.' And Benny felt his heart leap with excitement as the man reached to the back of the trolley. 'A jam doughnut.'

'I was hoping,' said Benny softly, licking his lips. 'I was hoping for...'

'Yes?' asked the little man.

'I was hoping. For something else.'

'Really?' The man leaned forward, eyes wide in what seemed like genuine curiosity. 'What?'

'A blue box. Do you... I mean, could you... Are there any blue boxes?'

The little man smiled warmly, and for a moment Benny felt his heart leap again. Then: 'You lost it he said flatly.

For just a moment Benny thought he had forgotten how to breathe.

But there it was again, kicking in, as it always did. In out in out, every single second precisely. On and on and on, over and over again, on and on and on and *on*.

'What do you think this is?' No anger. 'This is it. This is your life. You think there are second chances? Life is a very precious thing, Bernard Summerfield. There's a whole universe out there, but only if you've got the wit to see it.'

And Benny began to cry. For a few moments he was so surprised that he was actually *doing* that, he almost stopped to analyse it. He couldn't remember when he last cried. Hadn't when Robin left, hadn't when he began to realise, piece by piece, that his life was over. The tears were fresh and cool. And he liked the sound he made a few seconds later, that peculiar strangled sob coming out of his mouth which felt so odd but felt so *good*. He even quite liked the embarrassment on all his colleagues' faces – what *were* their names?

Should he have asked? – as they looked at him in alarm, then hastily turned back to their work.

'It's all right, Benny,' said the man softly. 'You're in luck. I'm in the business of giving second chances.'

'The blue box...' Benny almost stammered.

'It's at home. Waiting for you.'

'So when I finish work...?'

'No, no.' And for a moment the kindly face creased in impatience.

‘I mean, it’s waiting for you *now*, Benny. Now.’

The little man winked. Then beamed that smile of his one more time. And then was gone.

Benny looked numbly down at the doughnut, now bent out of shape. By his calculation, he’d spent a good eighty per cent of the last minute and a half wringing his hands in distress, and he’d forgotten he was still holding it. Even now he couldn’t remember what he had seen in the box, but he knew it had been something *different*. He wiped the sugar from his fingers before wiping the tears from his eyes, got up from his desk, and left. No one looked up at him to say goodbye.

Benny knew that they would never see him again. But then, Benny reasoned to himself as he drove his car home – so much quicker than usual, what fun! – they had never really seen him in the first place.

The box was on the dressing table, where he had left it all those years ago. He picked it up. Once more it was warm to the touch. He gave a cry of surprise as it became too hot to hold, and he dropped it to the floor.

Within seconds the box was his height. It didn’t exactly grow. One moment it was the little trinket he had put in his pocket. Another it was the size of a wardrobe, and always had been.

And, as the doors purred open, Benny suddenly remembered all the things he had glimpsed inside. He looked inside eagerly. This time there was another marvel waiting for him. Silhouetted in the doorway was the figure of a woman. As tall as he was. Not beautiful as Robin had been – once, before the wrinkles and the boredom – but beautiful all the same. Her face was flushed with experiences he had never had, but *should* have had. He wanted them so badly.

She held out her hand. He reached for it, and, as his finger touched hers, saw with curiosity the way they joined and became one. He wasn’t frightened, because now he knew. That this was Benny Summerfield. The Benny he should have been. The Benny he *would* have been, had his parents only conceived the child the night before, and not decided to watch an old movie on the holovid instead. He knew because he now knew *everything* she knew, his other self who had seen and done so much, much more.

There was no pain as his body fed into hers. How could there be? It was just a mirror image, refracting off a mirror image.

As their heads closed together, Benny stopped for a moment. Their faces were just inches apart, and for one second Benny thought he might kiss those lips in front of him. But he supposed that might be a tad narcissistic. Instead, the woman gave him a smile. For a ghastly moment Benny wasn’t sure he could smile back: he hadn’t practised

one for so long, and he'd never been much good at them in the first place. And just as he began to panic he realised he already *was* smiling.

He hadn't stopped ever since he left the office, left the doughnut, left his life.

He continued to smile as Benny swallowed Benny whole. As he became a Benny whose middle name was a thrilling Surprise, not a bland Stanley.

Just for an instant it looked as if there were two people in the box, embracing close. Then there was just one.

And then there were none, as the box disappeared, leaving that place in search of somewhere better.

13: Cuckoo

By Stephen Fewell

Archaeology means you spend a lot of time scraping.

Scraping in the dirt chiefly, but also scraping to investors to get them to fund the bastard dig in the first place. And then there's scraping a living.

I even scraped my knuckles as I fell into the excavation trench this morning.

Since the pregnancy, even now it was over, spatial awareness had not been my strong suit, but neither, come to that, had been even-temperedness, elegance or possession of a waist. Seven months of pregnancy left me a shadow of my former self. Seven months! In some judicial systems, you don't get that for breaking and entering.

'Hard or soft?' Corin, he of the Mythic Archetypes thesis and the nice little bottom, calls from the encampment. He means how do I prefer my eggs. I used the obvious riposte three weeks ago, so I settle for soft boiled.

Seven months without a shag has been done before. But seven months without drink? That's almost a decade in alcoholic years.

I really didn't come here for the nightlife, though. The only local fauna are the odd grey chicken-like buggers that nest in burrows near the watering hole. Somehow we've developed a taste for their eggs.

Better than the rations, with which I had to cut a few corners to keep us in the black. They make a very good breakfast omelette.

As a stropic vegan, Mabe is the only one who abstains. She's also recovering after breaking my aforementioned fall, so progress has been slow this afternoon. Shoring up the sandy topsoil and a slog through the clay beneath means we've only just reached the strata Geophys identifies as having been disturbed.

That said, no artefacts as yet, which would be disappointing if it didn't disprove De Tranveldt's theories so comprehensively. I've half a mind to call him just to see his face over the holo vid. Admittedly, I too would normally expect some sort of burial marker or inscription this close to an internment chamber, but what we have here seems to stray far from the Osiran, Ikkabanan and hence Egyptian patterns. It's fascinating.

The only other extant subterranean mausoleum is ten klicks away near the local outpost, Rashist, 'oasis' in the local tongue.

Mabe cries out in the twilight. She's found something solid in the slippery mud.

Together we scrape the clay aside, flicking the residue from our trowels. Nightworms begin to pop awake through the sides of the trench, looking for their mates. We work swiftly. The temperature drops quite suddenly at dusk here. We uncover a wooden crosspiece.

As I shake the tube torch into life my pulse begins to race.

How good does it feel to be back at work again, rather than being the walking incubator? People are treating me sanely again. I'm achieving something practical. I could almost believe it never happened. Before our fingers are too cold to hold the trowels, we reveal three sides of some sort of narrow doorway.

Defrosting around the stove later, my thoughts are running wild as to what may lie beyond. The Rashist Mausoleum has serried ranks of alcoves around its walls – De Tranveltdt would have it they once held canopic flasks containing the liquefied remains of some unpronounceable Warrior Queen. Mabe says we'll have to widen the entrance to get someone through it. She sounds like my midwife.

By way of a novelty there is no sand in my supper egg today. Mabe collects the alloy plates and takes the shells away for humane burial.

Flicking aside his blond fringe, Corin sits back and starts one of his tales; something obscure about Faeries and how they steal human children to toil in their subterranean mines. Eggshells are apparently the only way to tell if your child has been substituted with a changeling. All you have to do is leave out a plateful, and catch them eating them. Changeling children, he says, the orange light catching his eyes, can't resist a good munch. He leaves my sleeping bag early the following morning. No sex. I'm not ready. We just lie together for warmth. He leaves his vanilla smell behind to keep me company, but before even his farewell kiss on the nape of my neck has dried I am thinking of someone else. Is that something to do with growing older, when you start ignoring the opportunities of the present in order to revisit those of the past?

Good question for an archaeologist.

By the time we make eye contact again we have company, and his eyes flick away. It crosses my mind that I may have misjudged him, assumed his personality to be as robust and stout as his body. Like rock. Mine currently resembles a mudslide.

His strength is useful as shoulder to shoulder we dig downward into the floor of the trench, seeking the bottom of the wooden entrance frame.

Mabe moves in with her brushes while we take a breather. She asks me if I miss Peter. I say that of course I do, shielding my eyes from both the glare of the suns and her scrutiny. Every woman has to work

though. Keeps your brain functioning, doesn't it?

Mabe wants to remain at home with her children, she says, when she decides to have them, and to have an unassisted birth, possibly into a liquid breathing medium. I imagine her plain features contorting in the agony. She hasn't got a clue.

I spray water on my brow, and wash the mud from my stinging hands. They're ravaged with cuts from the mattock and from one badass chicken who didn't appreciate the dawn raid on its nest. The bugger drew blood. I suppose I'd feel the same if someone tried to eat my offspring.

Then again maybe not. It was all too easy to hand the little thing over to Joseph and jump on the first transport here.

Mabe hoists her carcass out of the trench, holding aloft a test tube.

DNA identification and C-dating should pin down where the timber hails from; wood's rarely utilised in Avanonion monuments. Corin volunteers why this is the case. Avanonion creation narratives, De Tranveldt theorises, sanctified trees, the original habitat from which their ancestors flew.

Bet he could have secured the finance for a solar pump. Our struggle through the hard-packed clay plug that fills the entrance isn't helped by the waterjet frame which keeps the wood hydrated. By late morning the duckboards are submerged, and my trousers are leaden.

I have just stripped down to my pants when Mabe bursts into my tent and hugs me. We have a result! Her sample predates Rashist by a good century, so as we settle down for lunch she's eagerly awaiting an uplink, Corin's grinning like a stoat, whilst I scrape the most important dirt this planet's antiquity has to offer from under my fingernails.

Mabe sends her report. Storms tonight, the satellite warns. Could be tricky. Sandstorms here have been known to shred people in minutes, so we all pray it's not a biggie. We rush back to the trench to get as much accomplished as possible before stormbreak.

We find devastation.

A great gaping maw is all that remains of our painstakingly excavated entrance. The water hose rears cobra-like in the middle, spewing liquid up the sides of the trench. Somehow it's got disconnected from the hydration frame and washed away great chunks of the supporting clay. Bugger.

'We'd have had to dismantle it anyway,' says Corin, 'to get someone into the chamber.' He snakes an arm around my shoulders as Mahe disconnects the supply.

'Indeed,' I say. That was the plan. During a series of well-documented, slavishly recorded, crushingly detailed excavations.

‘There’s only one way to find out,’ he says.

Somebody once said that archaeology was all about facts. How wrong were they? Faced with the undocumented past just metres away my imagination starts to soar on noradrenaline wings. Only imagination can turn fragments of pottery and dust into narratives about people, their lives and their desires. Pure alchemy. That’s what I love about Corin, how he approaches the past via myth and poem.

He’s standing behind me as I write this now. ‘There’s enough going on round here to write a novel,’ he’s whispering. I tell him I’m only putting in the good bits. And he’s not in it.

Don’t look over my shoulder. It isn’t finished. Even when it is, you’re not gonna get to read it, you git.

We kiss hungrily. Then we scramble down the muddy escarpment and venture into the unknown.

The air is damp, and smells of matches. Behind me, with a splash, he completes the metre drop from the entrance to the chamber floor. I can tell it’s quite large as the water level’s settled at barely a centimetre underfoot, and with each second my retinal rods reveal more of its monochromatic depths. Stalactites appear to link the floor with the low ceiling, enclosing an area shrouded in darkness at the heart of the chamber.

‘Catch!’

Mabe’s at the entrance like Uncle Abanazer, tossing down torches to Corin. He directs the light dead ahead, revealing the stalactites to be pillars, each sweeping majestically upwards into a roof ribbed and vaulted with thick striations. He swears eloquently. ‘These must be the three Weltbaum!’

Avanonion Myth says that when it was firstborn, the world got caught in their branches and was nourished, and grew alongside their own ‘fruit’, presumably this system’s suns. They only had one gender, and it’s thought that socially they formed tri-parental familial units.

Hence the significance of three. But nobody knows how they reproduced.

‘No alcoves in the walls,’ Mabe notes.

But then I see them. This isn’t a mausoleum at all. I point and the two of them turn to look. They’re sitting beneath the protective shade of the Avanonion Weltbaum.

Eggs.

‘Have you seen that old 2D?’ Mabe laughs nervously. ‘You know, the one where the guy finds these alien eggs, and one opens in front of his face and –’

I tell her to shut up now. In the distance, thunder rumbles. It’s

getting late.

‘They may be symbolic, like the trees,’ says Corin, crouching low on his haunches. ‘In many cultures the egg is a symbol for the soul.’

Both the words and his breath hang in the air. It’s getting cold.

Far from being statuary, on close examination some of the eggs are definitely mummified remains of empty shells. Mabe scans the darkness beyond the pillars and shivers. ‘I’d hate to meet the thing that laid them.’

I point out it need not actually have been that large, it could’ve had an episiotomy.

I record the cavern on holocamera and Mabe takes samples for DNA analysis. Apparently she’ll need others from local fauna to corroborate any conclusions. Given no one knows quite how the Avanonions died out, it’s even possible they could have gone interstellar and evolved into some other species.

Electrical storms skitter along the horizon as Corn and I protect the trench with plastic sheeting, its only respite from the coming storm. The wind blows sand in our eyes, catching the sheet underneath and whipping it from my grasp. Despite the rising panic I can’t help picturing us in these same positions, a domestic couple, inexpertly folding the bed linen. I think of Peter crying out, wanting his feed. He never does, of course. It would be terrible for everyone if he did. It’s just in my head, that that’s what babies should do.

But only the wind shrieks. We strike our individual tents for the safety of the combi. However cramped it remains the safest bet. I cradle a warm drink fortified from my hip flask, while Corin surveys the holorecord and the rain starts to lash down outside.

‘What’s this?’ He tilts his head like a perplexed Labrador. He leans in toward the image as if it were small print on a document. ‘I don’t remember that.’ He indicates a mark on one of the pixellated pillars, his other hand coming to rest on my thigh. ‘Zoom,’ he commands, and the program careers in for a close up. ‘If I didn’t know better I would definitely call that some sort of cartouche.’

‘Writing? You complete star.’

Only Mabe’s presence stops me snogging his shining face there and then. We already have a small amount of Avanonion writing to compare this find with. He smiles at me as the computer starts searching for a translation, and we settle down for the wait.

‘This DNA,’ Mabe pipes up from her station, never one to be left out. ‘You’re not going to believe this, Benny.’

It seems that several samples have no matches, and until the storm clears she can’t get local DNA to contrast it with. However, there are

others that the computer has identified immediately. She shows me the list and my heart leaps. 'Draconian, Ancetetan, Lakertyan, Chelonian... Bloody hell Mahe, this is just about every ab ovo species in the quadrant.'

Then the lights go out.

With a massive jolt, the combi rocks. My hair stands on end as all the terminals crash and the smell of burning metal caresses my nostrils. Bollocks.

In the light of what occurred later I have developed various paranoid fantasies as to how this happened, but for now let's just say the storm hit us. My fault, I thought, for forgetting to lower the satellite antenna after we battened down the hatches.

It's irreparable until the storm passes so, cursing our luck, we settle down for the night.

At least once Mabe has drifted off I have the consolation of some company. We clutch at each other as the storm rages all around, shaking the combi on its suspension.

I almost miss the morning. The windows are piled high with sand.

Corin and I only just disengage before Mabe starts stirring. He whistles off towards the waterhole to fetch chow.

Apart from a shiny new sand blasted exterior paintjob the combi seems intact. Mabe engages in a struggle with the slightly charred aerial, while I drag the canvas outside on to the newly unfamiliar terrain. Two chickens study my progress. Must have been displaced by the storm. They've never previously plucked up the courage to come near the encampment. Goddess knows how they survived last night.

The communal tent is up and the solar stove installed by the time Corin gets back, and we settle down to boil our eggs. 'Look,' he says, showing me a cut on his calf muscle, 'they got me this morning.'

Mabe rushes in to interrupt our morning kiss and snatch away our uncooked breakfast, departing with a mumble about needing DNA samples. 'Hang on,' he yells after her. 'Have you rebooted? What did my terminal say about the translation?'

'Two words. Make We.'

We sink down on our seats and look at each other. What the flop's that supposed to mean?

Sand flies in at the tent flap, stinging our eyes. Oh Goddess, not another storm! I race to lace up the flaps.

'Hope Mabe made it back to the combi,' shouts Corin, as ever increasing amounts pour in.

'Bugger!' is my final word as it fills my mouth and I gag. But just as

suddenly, it subsides. Spitting out Blackpool beach, I unlace the flap, and there in the gap stands a male figure, his hair tugged upward into horns by the slowing blades of the transport behind him. Lucifer in a linen suit. 'Professor Summerfield, I presume.'

'You bloody well do presume, De Tranveldt. I've never liked gatecrashers, so speak quickly before my personal bouncer here kicks your arse back to Corpus Galan.' Corin assumes the necessary apeline posture. Bless. He couldn't kick the arse of a kitten.

'Professor Summerfield, please! There's really no need for unpleasantness, as you will quickly see if you study this documentation. You will no doubt be aware that the excavation you are currently engaged in falls under the jurisdiction of the Avanonion Research and Security Executive.'

'Nice acronym.'

'And hence requires the approval not just of the local government, but also the Corpus Gaiae Archaeological Society – who purchased exploitation rights shortly after the publication of my last bestseller. Now, I'm a reasonable man, Bernice. We flew over the site not two minutes ago and it appears to be submerged under several metres of recently deposited storm sand. We both know you lack the financial and material resources to remove that sand, let alone the legal right. So I'm here to make you a proposition.'

'I'd rather spend the rest of my days shifting that sand through a leaky sieve than get into bed with you.'

'Share your DNA samples and holodata with me, and I will allow you to share the credit for the excavation.'

Corin calls him something with the words 'greasy' and 'little' in it, and leads me away towards the combi before I thump him. 'We're not going to get anywhere until we check out this document. So let's just swallow it, and let's get some legal advice, okay?'

'Okay,' I say, my teeth clenched so firmly it hurts.

Mabe roars with aggression as we open the back door of the combi, and springs at us with a length of pipe.

By the time I've pacified her and explained the situation Corin's got a basic legal assessment of De Tranveldt's paperwork. He shifts awkwardly, as if to leave.

'Where are you going?' I ask.

'Make wee,' he smiles, gesturing graphically.

When he's gone Mahe looks sheepish. There's something, she says, I should know. She's finished assessing the comparative data. I suppose I must look puzzled. She continues slightly louder and much slower.

The DNA sample of mummified eggshell, she says, showing me the bandings side by side, significantly corresponds to the shells left over

from our breakfast.

‘You’re saying those chicken things are the evolutionary descendants of the Avanonions.’

‘I also sampled some of the albumen,’ she adds, ‘and you’re not going to believe this.’

‘What?’

‘Genetically speaking, tomorrow you’d be eating your children for breakfast.’

Things you never normally hear, number 214 in a series of lots.

I know she’s opposed to eating animal products, but isn’t this taking emotional blackmail too far?

‘It’s fragmented, but the egg albumen contains long strands of human DNA. Your DNA.’ Her gaze displays a winning combination of pity mixed with mild disgust. It’s the last straw.

‘So which twisted bastard wrote, go to work on an egg?’ Typical Summerfield manoeuvre, avoid emotional outbursts with a well-timed witticism. Why doesn’t it work any more? My smile feels so weak, my tears could wash it off.

‘You’re missing him, aren’t you?’

I find myself nodding, so it must be true. ‘I don’t want to. I didn’t want any of this. Being pregnant, something growing inside me, someone else’s kid.’ I’m in floods now. ‘Why? Why should I bloody well have to bring it up?’

Cradling me like a child, Mabe rocks me back and forth against her patchouli-scented bosom. I dry my eyes, and try to get my breath back under control.

‘But it’s wonderful,’ she smiles. ‘Someone, somewhere, for the rest of their lives is always going to think of you as their mother.’

‘You mean apart from Jason?’

She just continues to look doe-eyed at me. I’m in the middle of having my claim jumped, and suddenly I’m in the middle of the biggest moodswing of all time. Just because I can see me putting the insides of one of those eggs into my mouth. ‘And I’m fat! I’m still fat! Why didn’t the baby take his luggage with him?!’

‘You look great. Corin certainly thinks so.’

‘Oh yes, and I had to buy a bigger bra. Because my breasts have doubled in size. Now they can almost be seen with the naked eye.’ I manage to get a hold on myself, and address the central question again before she can offer any more reassurance. ‘No, come on, why was I about to do a Titus Andronicus?’

But something’s scratching on the roof. Lots of somethings. We both look up at once.

Outside, we find the roof of the vehicle covered in chickens.

Mabe makes to shoo them away, but I stop her. 'Leave them be. They get pretty vicious when they're disturbed.'

'Do you think they know we're digging up their ancestors?'

We stare at each other in shock, but dismiss the idea within that same moment. It's ridiculous isn't it?

Over near the transport, beside the communal tent, two distant figures are talking. The answer drops like a stone into the pit of my belly. Corin.

I'm running towards them now, but he comes to intercept me.

Behind him De Tranveldt is talking animatedly into a pocket vocoder.

The vagaries of the Avanonion breeze carry his words to me.

'Draconians, Ancetetians, races with which mankind has had its share of conflict, yet which have always been regarded as fundamentally civilised. But upon this quiet world, long since forgotten by conventional historians, we find the evidence which betrays their guilty past. Cuckoos in the nest, dominating and abusing the very existence of their prey.'

'You gave him our data. How could you?'

He has his hands up. 'Benny, I checked his case out. It's sound. The dig is his. I'm just making sure you get the credit you deserve.'

'Don't I get to decide what I deserve? You bastard.' I strike out, fists clenched. I connect with bone. But I get the feeling I'm hurting myself rather than him.

He shrugs it off. 'This could be the biggest find this century. It could really put you on the map, and not just in archaeology, but xenobiology too.'

'And what makes you think I want to be even remotely associated with that jingoistic charlatan's bestselling theories? I mean, look at him swanning about like a dog with two dictaphones, in his big stupid grey feather hat -'

'Hat? What hat?'

He turns to look as I realise.

Then the screaming reaches us.

Those chicken things, loads of them, are squawking like devils and swarming around De Tranveldt's cream-suited form. One flaps about his head like an angry balloon. It's all I see before I turn and run.

It's like one of those nightmares. Running in sand. Every step sinking and shifting backwards behind you. They're at my ankles, Corin pulling me forwards to the combi. De Tranveldt starts shooting.

He gets off a couple of shots and then stops.

Mabe's at the controls, engine running. Sand spins from the wheel arches and exhaust fumes plume from the rear.

It's in my hair. I shake my head furiously, dislodging it before it gets

to peck my bloody eyes out. Corin's beating them back as we collapse through the sliding passenger side door, and Mabe hits the pedal. A couple of stragglers are kicked through an open window, but not before our hands have borne the brunt of their sharp beaks.

Even now there's blood on the keyboard.

'You can't leave. You can't let De Tranveldt take all the credit. Think what you'll be missing out on! The lecture tours, the bestselling book, the mention by all the tour guides! You can't let someone else have all the fun!'

'This is Bernice Summerfield you're talking to. The woman who had the agony of childbirth without the fun of conception.'

I'm going home.

'Someone –' I don't look back at him. 'Someone needs me.'

I don't look back.

After all, I'm not going back. De Tranveldt had it all wrong. He survived the attack, by the way, I've just heard.

On this long, dispiriting journey back home I realise what it's all about. Those eggs, I mean.

Our feathered friends weren't just defending their nests when they pecked me half to death every bloody breakfast time. They were harvesting DNA from our bloodstreams. Using it as raw material for their offspring in some long degenerated instinctive behavioural pattern.

Their ancestors may have behaved along similar lines, nurturing other species in their eggs, raising them as their own. Just as they believed then entire world had been nurtured, since the dawn of time.

'Make We,' I hear Corin saying, his voice as quiet and beautiful as the idea itself.

The Avanonions weren't the whipping boys of the galaxy, they were its foster parents.

'But why?' asks Mabe. 'Every species in the universe conforms to one single biological imperative. To survive and multiply by protecting their own offspring at the expense of others.'

'They didn't. And they ended up extinct.'

But I am already beginning to apprehend their plight, at least my imagination tells me I am.

How many races, I'm thinking, should call them mother?

14: A la Recherche du Temps Perdu

By David Bailey

The first day: a few years ago...

The first thing she was aware of was the dull throb of a hyperdrive matching the dull throb in her temples. She was on a ship. Bernice rubbed her eyes and sat up. Something rustled and thudded to the ground. A book: blank pages stared up at her, dimly reflecting the blue lights sunk into the holes in the metal ceiling.

She put her hands flat on the cold steel, ready to push herself to her feet. She crooked her knee and pain scorched up her leg, setting her temples throbbing again. Ice-cold sweat popped on her forehead and she fell back to the deck, breathless.

‘Ow.’ It even hurt to talk.

Gently she reached down to feel her leg and it was only as she touched the bandage sodden with blood that she began to wonder exactly how she had got here.

There was no one around, and this was a small room. A prison cell?

Not again. Please, not again. There was a small control panel to the left of the doorframe, its LEDs flickering without rhythm in the near-darkness.

‘Lights,’ she said, her dry tonsils sticking in her throat like shards of glass. ‘Ow, damn throat. Ow! No more talking to yourself, Bern-oww.’

Slowly, the little blue circles in the ceiling changed to a warm white, then just as slowly brightened. She looked around. A bed, which she’d obviously slept on top of: the sheets still lay tucked tightly under the thin mattress, and they were smeared here and there with pale pink bloodstains. A shower unit in one corner, with a bloodied towel stuffed carelessly into a washbasin standing next to it. The book – her diary? – the two blank pages still staring up at her. And one rather battered Bernice Summerfield.

The bandage on her right leg hid a cut probably six inches long, and it looked like a very impatient teacher had used it as blotting paper during a particularly angry – and lengthy – bout of marking. Timidly, she poked the red stain over the cut. My, but those pupils had been particularly stupid this time.

Her right trouser leg had been hurriedly hacked away, leaving a messy hem so high that Farrah Fawcett would have thought twice.

What was visible of her leg was peppered with dried-up cuts and night-blue bruises; her hands, too, had seen better days. There was a

mirror above the sink, but Bernice had neither the energy nor inclination to see exactly how messed up her face was. Besides which, standing up was still not an option.

Well, look on the bright side. The lights worked, and so did her eyes.

Gently, still afraid of taxing her body too much, Bernice reached to her side and took hold of the book. Its warm leather binding settled into her grip, and those two empty pages gazed at her. It was as if they were eager to be written on, pleading to be soiled with her rambles, the kind of rambles she'd re-read then judiciously edit with the careful use of post-it notes. Cover that, muddy this... Forget that.

That was it. She was forgetting something. How did she get here?

Maybe the diary knew...

She flicked through the book, its thick, warm pages rippling by with a swoosh. That was odd. She flicked through again, but it was just the same: brand new, empty, nothing there.

No. Wait. There's something on that page. Not her handwriting, but definitely her...

Bernice stopped and looked again. There was nothing. Not a word.

Not a scratch of pen or pencil, not even an idle doodle. The diary was entirely blank.

She put her hands flat on the cold steel, ready to push herself to her feet. She crooked her knee and pain scorched up her leg, setting her temples throbbing. Ice-cold sweat popped on her forehead and she fell back to the deck, breathless.

'Ow.' It even hurt to talk.

She was obviously hurt, but how badly? There was certainly a gash in her leg: looking at it, she could see that it was large. Someone had bandaged it, but it didn't seem to have done much good. The deep red smear on the grimy dressing put her in mind of the way her school exercise books used to look when she was seven. Ironical that someone who made their bread and butter as an academic should have had such an inauspicious start to their schooling.

Her whole body seemed to have been through the wars: she was peppered with dried-up cuts and night-blue bruises. She could do with a shower, but she wasn't going to chance trying to make it to the unit in the corner. Besides, there was no way she was going to dry herself with that filthy towel.

Beneath her, she could hear a hyperdrive humming moodily, but no sooner had she noticed the noise than it abruptly lowered and fell away. She was on a ship, then, and it had just come out of FTL travel.

Could she communicate with someone? She obviously needed help. Did she have anything with her she could use? Typical, the only other thing in the room was her diary. She scooped the book up from the

floor and closed it.

The pages sighed as the covers shut around them.

Bernice sighed too, and then decided that sleep was the best course of action. When she woke, she was back in her real life and it was just another day.

The next day: today...

The rapid, high-pitched chiming of her comm unit dragged Bernice from her sleep. Heavily, she pulled herself off the sofa and staggered to the desk and picked the unit up. A red pulsing display told her that Brax was trying to get in touch, but she seemed to have left her brain behind in dreams and so couldn't quite remember which button to press to accept the call. She was sure it wasn't the red X, but pressed it anyway.

The chiming stopped and she ran her fingers through her hair, rubbing her scalp. Bernice blinked a couple of times and yawned expansively. Wolsey mewed at her from the floor. She glanced at him, and was greeted with a look which told her that her snooze had turned into something a little more extravagant. Well, looking after Peter was tiring work and, since today her son was with his father, there was no reason for her not to enjoy a jumbo cat nap.

The cat! A quick check of the clock told her that Wolsey's impatient glare was down to the fact that he normally would have been fed three hours ago. Instead, he'd probably been fed up for two and a half.

As she walked into the kitchen to see to Wolsey's dinner, she heard the comm unit bleep behind her. Brax had left a message. 'Play message,' Bernice yelled over her shoulder, reaching for a tin of cat food.

The sound of Brax's voice was piped through the small speakers above the kitchen worktops. 'Benny when you've got a minute, could you give me a call? We've got a Professor Charles Stafford visiting in a day or two, and he's interested in meeting you. Says he's writing a piece about the myth of Canatha, and he's heard that you tried looking for the place a few years ago. He wants to know what you found out.

So, speak to you soon.' There was a beep, and the speakers fell silent.

'Canatha?' Bernice muttered to herself.

Wolsey mewed – clearly angry now – and she shook her head and got on with opening the tin.

When she returned to her desk – a cup of tea later, and feeling much more awake – she tuned on her computer and searched her notes for Canatha. Nothing came up in any of her own writings, and the only

mention of the place (assuming, from what Brax said, that it *was* a place) in the Collection's library was in a paper by one Doctor Gendren Mallfi entitled 'The Warrior Afterlives of the Ellemede Galaxy, Second Sector'. She called up the paper, and searched for 'Canatha'.

There were only a handful of instances of the word. Scrolling down, she found the relevant passage:

"Canatha or 'Cairnaddur' crops up little in modern myths of great warrior halls in the otherworld. The survival of this story is down to the still-strong oral tradition in the sector, as Brantyr, the world on which the myth developed, is long dead. It is still told in parts of the Second Sector, but it holds little meaning for many of the races: it exists primarily as a warning of the folly of pride. The story that remains is a vivid one, though it is impossible to ignore the distinct possibility that millennia of retellings have changed the facts, such as they were.

Canatha, it is said, was a realm of welcoming fires and grand feasts open to only the greatest warriors of the Brantyr. Should these warriors have proven themselves to be peerless among the planet's armies, and should they own (some tellings favour 'should they have made') the finest weapons, the doors of Canatha would be open to them. They would gladly leave this world for the halls of Canatha, and there they would wait until the war so great came that all the mightiest soldiers and most destructive weapons would be returned to smite Brantyr's foes."

'And I went *looking* for it!' But the name still wasn't ringing any bells.

"Of course, the Brantyr's pride in their unbeatable army in the sky was misplaced. Where was this army when the planet was laid waste by the vicious incendiary devices and countless geomorphic foot soldiers wielded by the dreadful spacefleets of Karthos, in the neighbouring system? Brantyr was destroyed, and the myth fell into obscurity."

'Karthos?' Now that was a different kettle of fireflies. Just under a year ago, Bernice had visited that cold and lifeless world in search of her missing friend, Caitlin. By the time she had found Caitlin, Bernice had discovered that the long-dead inhabitants of the planet had left behind their greatest weapon, creatures the colonists on Karthos had nicknamed fireflies.

These vicious and unstoppable monsters created themselves out of nothing more than carbon and thulium, a common element in starship fuel. They also had the power to set planets' skies on fire. Had she not

managed to shut them down, the fireflies would have spread through the spacelanes aimlessly destroying everything in their path.

And since both carbon and thulium were abundant in the inhabited sectors, they would have increased in number and soon burnt the entire galaxy.

She shivered, and spared a thought for the poor inhabitants of Brantyr. When she met the fireflies, they were being barely controlled by a feeble human mind that didn't really know what it was doing.

When Karthos invaded Brantyr, no doubt the fireflies were operating with a terrifying and single-minded purpose. No wonder there was nothing left of the planet.

Why was it, she suddenly wondered, that all these warlike races from aeons past left their most deadly arsenals just lying around? And why was it, she wondered more, that she'd chosen to be an archaeologist and so first in the firing line when they were uncovered from their dusty storerooms?

But Brax's message still wasn't making any sense. Bernice was sure she'd never heard of Canatha before today, and Brax had said she'd gone looking for it 'a few years ago'. And what on earth had she been doing looking for a mythical afterlife jam-packed with the toughest soldiers in the universe?

What did she plan to do if she found it? 'Oh, hello, chaps! Don't mind me, I'm just checking out your military capabilities. And exactly how long is it since you've seen a woman...?'

Wait a minute! Maybe Bernice had written something about Canatha in one of her diaries of the time. If she'd found nothing definite, there was probably no reason to mention it in her notes. But maybe she'd wittered on about it to herself. She'd certainly recorded far less interesting things for posterity.

She dashed to her bedroom, and pulled a battered suitcase from under the bed. Opening it, she was greeted by the spines of what seemed to be a thousand dog-eared books: red leather bindings, black cardboard bindings, bindings so worn they had no colour – or even binding – any more. These books meant more to Bernice than she cared to admit – and she had been devastated when the vengeful sorceress Avril Fenman had destroyed them. Then, out of the blue after the party to mark the Grand Opening of Brax's new Art Gallery, they had mysteriously turned up on her bed. Attached had been a note:

"Sorry I couldn't make it in person but I happened across these on Kar-Charrat and thought you might like them back. Or forward.

Whatever. PS: Wolsey is getting fat!" Wolsey, who had been curled up beside the hooks had pricked up his ears when Benny read the note to him, and then flicked his tail in a "I'm not fat, I'm big-boned" kind

of way. In a no doubt hormonally-fuelled bout of tidying up, Bernice had decided to put these books into some sort of order. Maybe she wanted her son to read them one day.

She looked at the diaries again, and at a line of particularly well-used ones. Now, 'a few years ago' could mean anything, but as she ran her fingers across the books' edges and back through time, her eyes were drawn to a particularly smart-looking, and completely virgin, leather spine. That was 'a few years ago'. She pulled out the diary and opened it at a random page.

Nothing.

She flicked through. Still nothing. The diary was completely empty.

She stared at the pages, the leather of the covers warm in her hands, and wondered why she'd keep a diary with nothing in it.

Not nothing. No. There's something on that page. Not her handwriting, but definitely her...

She put her hands flat on the cold steel, ready to push herself to her feet. She crooked her knee and pain scorched up her leg, setting her temples throbbing. Ice-cold sweat popped on her forehead and she fell back to the deck, breathless.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Bernice closed the diary and walked through to the hall, dropping the book on her desk in the sitting room as she went. Whatever she'd been about to write on those inviting white pages would have to wait until later.

'In a day or two, you said, Brax,' Bernice hissed at him as they made tea for her guest.

'Yes, and that was the day before yesterday.' He finished swishing the tea leaves around the pot and put the wet spoon on the worktop.

Bernice tutted, picked it up and threw it in the sink. 'But you only called me about half an hour ago!'

'Oh, don't be ridiculous, Benny,' Brax said, folding his arms. 'And let me tell you, Adrian's none too pleased at you swanning off on one of your adventures and dumping Peter on him for two days.'

'What?'

'Well, he was *quite* pleased, I suppose,' he said, smiling. 'Peter's really enjoying that war poetry.'

'Oh, I do wish Adrian wouldn't... Hang on. Hang right on. I distinctly remember taking Peter over to Adrian's apartment this morning. *This morning. Today.*'

'Have you been drinking?'

'Brax!'

'All right, all right,' he said, raising his palms to deflect her angry stare. 'Anyway I've got to be on my way. Ms Jones has demanded we have a meeting about my expenses, and my life is too short – and too

precious – to cause trouble by missing it. And do be nice to Professor Stafford.'

'I'm always nice.'

Brax raised an eyebrow. '*Do* be nice. He's very eager to hear what you found out about Canatha.'

'Can-what-tha?'

'Sorry?'

'Pardon?'

Brax sighed. 'I'll see you later.' And with that, he stalked out of the kitchen.

'Wait a minute!' Bernice dashed out to follow him. 'Professor who?'

But Brax had left the apartment, leaving Professor Who beaming at her from the sofa.

'Professor Charles Stafford,' he said, standing and holding out a hand for her to shake. She took it. His hand felt dry as paper, the soft skin of an academic. He wore the clothes of an academic too, a carefully assembled tweed suit over a very slight frame. He stood only as tall as Bernice's shoulder. 'We were introduced.'

'Were we?'

'Just a few minutes ago, at your front door. Mr Braxiatel told me that you were expecting me.'

'Was I?'

Stafford shuffled uncomfortably. He was about five years older than Bernice, she supposed, with neat, short brown hair. His eyes – hidden by minuscule round glasses – were lined with crow's feet that told of a life of smiling. Just like now, Bernice noticed, as he grinned to expose the most perfect teeth she thought she'd ever seen.

Persuasive teeth. Teeth you really couldn't argue with.

'I suppose I was and we were,' Bernice mumbled, scratching her forehead. 'I'm sorry. I seem to be having one of those days.'

'That's quite all right, Professor Sunamerfield.'

'Benny, please.' She waved at the sofa. 'Please do take a seat. I'll fetch the tea.'

'So, fetch the tea you did. Don't you remember?'

The man was smiling at her. All teeth, white teeth. Like a shark's.

Bernice was suddenly reminded of some holovid documentary she'd seen about the black-fin sharks of Chosan; one of those stupid things where the stupid man puts himself stupidly within biting/spitting/mauling distance of the most dangerous creatures in the universe. The sharks, no less stupid than he, had just thought,

'Free meal!' and bitten him. The gash in his leg had been as long as his forearm, and he continued to narrate the documentary through gritted teeth as some horny-handed surgeon-at-sea stitched it up. It

was one of the nastiest wounds Bernice had ever seen. She winced and rubbed her right thigh in sympathy.

‘Are you all right?’ asked the man.

She’d forgotten about him.

‘Professor Summerfield?’ His smile was faltering. ‘Benny?’

Bernice was holding a book. It was open, balanced on her flattened palm. ‘Tea?’

He waved a hand at the pot and cups on the table, and his smile returned to its former glory. ‘You’ve done that.’

‘No, I mean... I don’t remember anything about tea.’

‘That’s all right. You sit down again.’ He patted the cushion next to him on the sofa. ‘I’ve obviously caught you on a bad day.’

That smile was going nowhere, Bernice noticed. It was like a lighthouse: bright, regular flashes signalling something nasty lying under the surface.

‘Who the hell are you?’ She clapped the book shut and clutched it to her breast. Ice-cold sweat popped on her forehead. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘You really don’t remember? My name is Stafford, and I am your invited guest.’

Bernice took a couple of steps backwards, gripping on to the book like it was a riot shield. ‘I’ve never met you before.’

‘I’m here to discuss the matter of Canatha. And that book.’

The room was spinning. Bernice swore she could hear him laugh, quietly confidently. Slowly, she drew the book away from her and stared at it.

‘This is just an empty diary or something.’ She flicked through it, and showed him blank page after blank page.

Stafford wasn’t even looking. His pale eyes never broke from hers.

‘Read me something from it, please.’

‘There’s nothing here!’ Bernice’s heart beat faster and faster, and red swam before her eyes. Angry bout of marking. *Déjà vu*.

‘Just read the book, please, Professor Stunmerfield.’

Impatient teacher. Red ink. Exercise book. Hyperdrive.

And pain scorched up her leg and through dried-up cuts and night-blue bruises and into her head and into the book and never, never out again.

The book terrified Bernice. She threw it on to the floor next to the bed, and then threw herself on top of the tightly-folded sheets. She half wanted to turn her head and look at the book again, but she kept her eyes focused on the little blue circles of light inset in the ceiling. She knew it wouldn’t be long before she forgot everything, and she just didn’t want to think about it any more.

Have you ever tried not thinking of something? Of course you have, and so you'll know why Bernice could simply think of nothing else. It turned her stomach, it brought cold sweat to cover her whole body, it filled her head so much that she wondered if it would burst, but she couldn't stop thinking about it.

Well, soon something would stop thinking about it for her.

Canatha. A genebank of cuckoo children and a nanoscopic transmat device. Beam your best soldiers – or millions of clones of a handful of the best – into the wombs of a world, wait nine months... It was the paramilitary version of a natural process, only a system away from the Avanonions. That couldn't have been a coincidence.

The genetic disruption ensured that, not long after birth, the women died a horrible death, their bodies becoming breeding grounds for a horrific and deadly plague, to which, of course, the newborn soldiers (by now, thanks to accelerated growth genes, about as grown-up as a twenty year-old human male) were completely immune. Billions of birds with one stone. Your enemy's world: dead.

And a numberless army ready to appropriate their military technology and invade the rest of the system.

And the whole thing still existed. Oh, dusty and derelict, sure. But some single-minded nutjob, spurred on by De Tranveldt's book, could easily get it up and running again. She'd found it. She knew where it was, and knew how many worlds in the Second Sector had fallen to its devastating effects.

And he'd got her to risk her life and her sanity doing it, playing her like the fool she was. 'Oh, hello, Professor Stafford! Lovely to meet you! Ancient warrior resting-place, you say? That sounds fascinating! Of course I'll do all your tiring footwork. Give me a couple of months, and I'll find it for you! And then, when I do, I'll gladly get shredded by the hordes of security robots the builders of Canatha left behind!'

Idiot.

'So you went looking for it, and you found it.'

Bernice's wrists burnt. She still felt woozy, but was with it enough to know that rough ropes were cutting tightly into her arms and binding her ankles firmly together. This man – Stafford, did he say his name was? – had obviously tied her to this chair while she was unconscious. And, in line with the Classic Villain Masterclass, he seemed now to be boasting about his grand scheme.

'Problem is, you can't tell me where it is because of that blasted book.' His eyes fell to a leather-bound diary lying on the floor near her feet.

'Where what is?' A haze was floating in front of her eyes. Benny blinked hard a couple of times.

‘Oh, this is getting tiresome,’ he sighed.

‘I genuinely don’t know what –’

Stafford flapped his arms at her. ‘I know you don’t know what I’m talking about, which is why I’m trying to explain! If you’ll let me continue...?’

Bernice shrugged as best she could considering her arms were fastened to her sides.

‘That book was a gift, a bribe from me to you to persuade you to search for Canatha for me. I knew you were a far more capable archaeologist than I, and my clients were eager to find Canatha as soon as possible. I merely had to find some way of persuading you firstly that my intentions were honourable, and secondly that acting on my behalf would be worth your while.

‘So I gave you a mnemosine store book. How long have you been searching for one of those, Professor Summerfield?’

‘All my life!’ Bernice gazed at the book again and, despite her confused state and obviously precarious position, managed to summon a smile of wonder. ‘Those things are like gold dust! No, they’re like... What’s rarer than gold dust?’

‘Mnemosine store books?’

Bernice lay back on the bed, trying to rest, but the harder her body pressed against the tough mattress, the more her many wounds hurt.

She’d make sure that Stafford paid for this if she ever saw him again. If she remembered him, that was.

Her head ached slightly; a side effect, she supposed, of the mnemosine storage process. She’d locked all her knowledge of this stupid adventure, all the secrets of Canatha, inside the book. It was a simple matter, once she’d got the knack. Everything she’d heard about these books suggested it was easy, and it was: open the book at any page, think about writing down what you wanted to keep in it, and there it would all go, straight from your mind into the book.

Only thing was, it was a one-way ticket. Well, not quite, but you’d certainly forget whatever it was you put into the book, until you opened it again and thought about reading it. If the circumstances were right, and the reader so desired, the contents of the book could be read out to an audience. But it was only ever the owner of the memories who could access the information stored in the book, and even then the memories would remain forgotten whenever the book was closed.

Thank the Goddess.

Bernice didn’t intend to be looking up the horrors of Canatha too often, or remembering anything about Stafford and those ‘clients’ of his, whichever warmongering madmen they were.

So, like the inveterate diarist she was, she'd put it all in the book: from the minute she met Stafford, to the minute this freighter dropped her back at the Collection, which, according to the captain, would be in about two hours, throughout which she intended to top up the book just to make sure every nasty memory was locked up for good.

And then, for good measure, she went back to the beginning and made a few changes.

'Of course,' Stafford continued, 'it was my own fault. Why couldn't your greatest wish have been for a box of chocolates or some tickets to the theatre? But no, Professor Bernice Summerfield would settle for nothing less than a gift in which she could hide the very thing I wanted her to find!

'They would have paid you very handsomely, you know, my employers. But you lost interest the minute you checked my credentials. And, may I say, it was a little remiss of you to look into my...' He paused and smiled. '...my business interests *after* you'd found Canatha. We could have saved ourselves an awful lot of bother.'

Bernice wished this was making more sense, but decided to just keep schtum.

'But I expect that, when you discovered just what Canatha was, you wanted to make sure you weren't turning it over to the wrong hands.'

Stafford lifted up the book from the floor. He stroked the cover, and Bernice could hear his dry hands scraping across the worn leather.

'And the wrong hands would, of course, be yours,' she said.

'Oh, I should think so, yes.' Stafford smiled and opened the book, holding a blank page up for her to see. 'So, for the final time of asking, would you please read me the contents of the book?'

'Listen, Professor Stafford,' Bernice furrowed her brow and struggled against her bonds to sit up a little straighter. Her eyes met his and she thinned her lips to a hard line. 'I have about half a vague notion as to what the hell is going on here, but I think I've figured out a couple of things.'

Stafford smiled. 'Go on.'

'First of all, you are a very, very bad man. Nice academics who are after my pearls of wisdom don't usually tie me to chairs to get them.'

'A fair point.'

'It follows, then, that whatever you want me to read out of that book is something I don't want to tell you. In fact, that's probably why I put the memories of it into that book in the first place.'

'Tell me, does your understanding of twentieth-century popular culture extend to the phrase, "Like, d'uh"?''

'Cute. All this leads me to a very concise concluding answer to your request. Just two words, in fact. A very indelicate two words, at that.'

Stafford just stared at her, his little eyes unblinking.

‘Have you ever tried not thinking about something, Professor?’ he said.

He held the book closer, so that the blank pages obscured nearly all of her vision. His smiling eyes were still just about visible.

Bernice’s eyes narrowed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t read the book, then.’

The pages moved closer still, the shadow of Bernice’s head the only thing visible on them. She could feel the warmth of her breath flowing back off them.

‘Don’t read it out loud. Don’t just let yourself tell me everything that is in here.’

The dizziness was returning, and her vision blurred. All she could see was the white of paper, the empty nothingness. It was tempting just to fall into it, like having one foot in a warm bath when the phone rings. But even if she wanted to read what was in front of her, she could see nothing.

No, not nothing.

There’s something on that page. Not her handwriting, but definitely her...

Bernice could hear her voice. Something inside was screaming at her to stop, but she could do nothing but listen. And smile.

‘Hello, Professor Stafford,’ she read. ‘Before we go any further... Comm channel open! Brax! Jason! Adrian! Help!’

Stafford spun around at the fizz of the channel opening. But even as the smile faded from his eyes, he kept the book in her face. The look on his face said he knew that sooner or later she would have to tell him what he wanted to know.

‘Now, Charles, you didn’t think I’d be so stupid as not to expect you to come hunting for me, do you?’ Bernice read. ‘I knew you’d look for me, and I knew you understood me well enough to know I’d never let you have the location of Canatha. I can only say thank you for providing me with the means to make sure that would never happen.’

‘You’re right, before too long, I’ll get on to all the important stuff you want to hear, but you’d be surprised just how much junk these mnemosine books can hold. A whole universe of stories, if you try hard enough. Certainly enough to keep us both occupied until my help arrives. But if you’re willing to take that gamble...

‘For the first few years at least, I had a happy childhood. My Father was an Admiral...’

Bernice Summerfield’s diary:

Well, that was a day and a half. But it only felt like two hours. I seem to have spent a lot of today unconscious, but I’m not entirely, sure why.

Something to do with the nasty spitting, snarling academic Adrian dragged from my apartment this afternoon, I expect. And the book that Brax took from me and had burnt.

He tried to explain what had been going on, but for some reason none of what he was telling me would stick in my mind. Some nonsense about... No, I'm buggered if I can remember any of it now. Too tired, I suppose.

Brax was asking me how I could have been so stupid, said it was all to do with something that happened years ago. It's all made me think: I suppose I should sit down with some of my old diaries one of these days, and have a good old look at all those bits and bobs of my life I've let drift from my memory. Like all this business: a nasty business, going by the names that Professor was calling me. For the life of me, I cannot think what on earth I could have done to upset him so.

Anyway, I'm going to get some sleep and try to forget all about it.

15: Squadborronfell

By Nick Walters

The battlefield at Squadborronfell on the planet Farlorne, where the Sydiast made their final stand: a hundred square miles of trenches, bunkers and earthworks. Grey stone battlements like rotten teeth, pocked and weathered by the passing centuries. Trenches fallen to ditches of mud. Craters of twisted, rusted metal and rubble. Above it all, a rolling, dark ceiling of clouds. Around it all, green grass, lush and springy, nourished by the unrelenting rain.

On the southern edge of the battlefield is an underground bunker, a small cube cut into the mud, its entrance hatch hidden amidst the curling green blades. It might once have been a munitions store, or a bomb shelter.

Or a prison cell. A torture chamber...

Professor Bernice Summerfield is chained to the wall. Her arms are stretched out above her head, secured in rusting manacles attached to thick, immovable bolts. Her shoulders feel as though they are going to rip from their sockets at any moment. Her legs, braced against the waterlogged floor, are seized up with agonising cramps. There's a swollen wound on the side of her head which throbs in time with her pulse. In comparison, it's almost soothing.

She shivers and gasps as pain works through her body. It's cold, but she's sweating with the effort of coping. It's dark, but her eyes are wide, staring into nothing. All she can hear is her own ragged breathing and the sloshing of the water which has begun to seep over the tops of her boots.

Water which is slowly, unstoppably, rising.

The landing ramp swung outwards and down. The grass beneath the *Galatea*, illuminated by the landing-lights, shone a bright emerald green, the droplets of rainwater clinging to it twinkling like tiny diamonds. A curtain of rain hid everything beyond the ship from view.

Bernice Summerfield had a quip prepared for this moment. 'I *knew* I should have packed my brolly.'

No one laughed. Military types.

And Stefnie? She was staring wonder-struck at the alien vista.

Probably hadn't even heard.

Bernice tried again. 'Well, here it is. Farlorne. We'll be the first visitors for, ooh, about seven hundred years. How do you feel about that?'

‘Terrified,’ gasped Stefnie. ‘Er, um, I mean, excited.’ Her eyes gleamed.

Stefnie Vollier was a young exobiology student from one of the Earth colonies. This was her first major expedition. She was a shy girl, her petite figure veiled by baggy, non-descript clothes. Her face had a vaguely Oriental cast, with high cheekbones and deep brown eyes which always seemed to shine with curiosity, wonder or enthusiasm.

Her hair was a mousy brown, a shade or two darker than her skin, drawn back from her face and tied up in a complex arrangement of plaits.

‘Professor Summertield,’ the voice was Captain Helsall’s. ‘We’re moving out right away.’

Although Bernice was technically in charge of the expedition, the ship and crew came under Helsall’s command. He was a big man, with dark crewcut hair and pale skin, and a rather bony, exposed-looking face. His blue eyes had that unblinking quality of the seasoned soldier. His uniform – and his ship, and his manners – were unbearably neat.

Bernice had yet to see him smile.

‘So, no question of staying here for an hour or so?’ she said lightly.

‘While we do remote sensor checks, make sure the planet’s not a single vast living organism with its mouth right in front of the landing ramp, that sort of thing?’

Helsall’s eyes narrowed. ‘Humour,’ he said. ‘I like it. Let’s go!’

‘Great!’ Stefnie started down the ramp.

‘Hang on,’ sighed Bernice, putting a hand on her shoulder. ‘I’m leader of this expedition. I should have first foot. Even if it’s foot in mouth.’

‘Of course, Professor.’ She stood aside and Bernice walked down the studded metal ramp, protected from the rain by the overhanging bulk of the ship.

Halfway down the ramp it was amazing how far away the warm technological cocoon of the *Galatea* seemed already. The hiss of the cooling engines merged with the steady roar of the rain thundering against the hull of the ship. A sea of wet green grass beckoned. Such a normal, Earth-type thing. So frightening when new.

Bernice stepped on to the surface of Farlorne. Her boots sank a little into the mud. She took a few steps, and realised that yes, actually, she was relishing the solid – if soggy – ground, after days of zero-g.

She turned and grinned up at her fellow explorers. ‘Come on in, the water’s lovely.’

Again, no one laughed.

The water has risen to just below her knees. Its cold seems to slice right through to the bone. Her teeth chatter and she can’t stop herself

from shivering. Mouth and throat sand-dry. *Water; water; everywhere, and not a drop to drink.* She can hear it dripping, feel it sloshing around her boots. *Torture.* She can hear rain drumming on something up above. An entrance? She tries to visualise her surroundings, but can't concentrate for more than seconds at a time. The pain won't let her, constantly tearing at her body. Her mind is also snapping under the strain, betraying her, taunting her with images from the past, happier times. Images of faces she'd loved. And scenarios of rescue, of escape from agony.

But Bernice knows there is no escape.

Is this how it ends?

Bernice stared through the narrow window slit at the rain, half-hypnotised. There was no wind, so it was coining down more or less vertically, a shimmering shroud across the night.

Somewhere beyond, the *Galatea* crouched, waiting for their return.

It was ironic. Having counselled caution earlier, now she was feeling frustrated by the waiting, but she also knew it was for the best.

Military people understood darkness. You arrive under cover of it, you venture into the unknown when you can see what you're doing. This tiny bridgehead was all they knew of this planet so far. The real expedition could begin in daylight.

Footsteps behind her, echoing on the tiled floor.

Bernice turned, shining her torch into the darkness. The beam picked out a small figure, lost within a bulky thermal suit.

Only Stefnie.

Bernice relaxed. 'What's the matter, can't sleep either?'

Stefnie's eyes shone in the torchlight. 'I can't wait until daylight. Can't wait to start exploring.'

Bernice smiled. 'Well, we could do a preliminary survey of this place, make some guesses. We'll stay inside the perimeter.'

They were in a semi-circular fort on the southern edge of the battlefield, which looked to Bernice as if it had once been used for the storage of weapons and ammunition. The interior was divided into a series of small magazines, linked by the perimeter corridor in which they now stood. Its windows held no glass. Captain Helsall had set up a forcefield which kept out the weather and the sound of the rain. And anything else that might be out there. He had declared this to be safe ground.

They started their survey along the guard corridor.

'Obviously as scientists, we don't believe in ancient curses,' said Stefnie after a while. 'So why has no one come here for so long?'

'Well, one, it's rather out of the way, and two, it probably is because of the curse.' She saw Stefnie's eyes widen. 'There's nothing in it,

believe me. About a thousand years ago, there was a battle here. An ancient race called the Sydiast faced an enemy no one knows anything about. Both sides perished, no one knows how. And no one's bothered to try to find out, until us.'

'And anyone desecrating the battlefield will die,' said Stefnie in a funereal tone.

Bernice sniffed. 'Pretty standard stuff. When you've been around as much as I have, you begin to take curses with a pinch of salt. I have never been successfully cursed. And everything else bad that could happen to someone like me has. I'm living proof of Sod's Law. But no cursing. Ipso fatso: no such thing.'

'Captain Helsall seems to believe in it,' said Stefnie. 'That's why we're staying here, not on the ship.'

That military madness again. A reason to get into cover, a reason not to explore, a superstition about not staying near a fuel load. Hence the urge to get on to the ground as soon as possible. Bernice realised that she'd tried to put a picture of his motivations together and failed.

Maybe she'd never understand the military mind.

They walked on in silence for a while, their torch-beams sending lances of blue-white light on to the darkness, setting off scampering shadows in the arched corridor ahead of them.

And, presumably, behind them. But Bernice didn't feel like turning to look. She suddenly felt cold.

Something touched Bernice's hand. She gasped, gathering breath, but it was only Stefnie. Bernice grabbed the girl's hand tightly.

'I don't like the way this corridor curves all the time,' whispered Stefnie. 'Looks like something could come running round the corner at us any moment.'

Bernice wished she hadn't said that. She was fighting down a rising feeling of dread. What the hell was wrong with her? She wasn't usually this... 'jumpy' wasn't the word. Terrified. But of what? They had the forcefield, the communicators, they were safe.

Then there came a sound from up ahead. A low groaning, like a vast empty stomach keening for food.

Suddenly Bernice couldn't move. Sweat prickled her scalp and ran down her back. She was shivering.

'What was that?' hissed Stefnie, just as the sound came again, louder now.

Then suddenly Bernice found that she *could* move, so she did. She turned and ran, blindly, back through the guard corridor, ignoring Stefnie's shout of alarm.

Not far behind, she heard the sound again, heard it escalate into a piercing shriek of insane laughter.

Bernice can't stop herself from hearing the trickling voice of the rising water. Can't stop herself from thinking about it. Well above her knees now. In a few hours, it will all be over.

No way to stop it. One tiny, impossible hope: maybe, if the rain eases off, the water will stop running in. And then, how long before it soaks out through the floor of the cell?

Where are the others? What if the *Galatea* has already left Farlorne?

Bernice tries to fight down the panic. Tries to think her way out.

Tries to remember how she got here. But the last thing she remembers is talking to Stefnie in the fort. Then – what? The lump on the side of her head pulses with pain, as if trying to remind her.

Suddenly, there's a sound above her. A sinuous grating, like metal against stone. And, all at once, a hatch in the ceiling opens. Grey light and a whirl of raindrops. Now she can see the walls, see the gently rippling surface of the water, see a rusty ladder leading up to the hatch.

See a figure begin to climb down the ladder.

Bernice ran until the mad laughter was far behind her, and came to a spluttering halt somewhere round the other side of the guard corridor.

As she crouched, hands on knees, the feeling of fear ebbed away to a level where she could think. And a theory popped into her head, fully formed and twinkling like a newborn star. Of course! Perhaps she'd come under mental attack, from something on the planet. Yes! Thai would account for the fate of the Sydiast. And the curse. Anyway, she'd think it all through properly when she was safe on board the *Galatea* warping the hell away from Paelorne.

Bernice stood up to get her hearings. The billets where the crew were camped were all in one section of the magazines, a short way from the entrance. She jogged back to them. 'Hey, I've solved the secret of Squadborrowfell!' she yelled, hearing her voice echo through the semicircle of stone. She giggled, feeling suddenly light-headed.

'Hey! I know what it's all about!'

She put a hand to her mouth. She suddenly felt drunk and ashamed. Something was getting to her. More than it should.

Something was messing with her brain.

She came to the first of the billets. It was a mess: clothes and equipment strewn about, the bed tipped over on to its side. No crewman.

The next magazine was the same. And the next.

Heart pounding, Bernice ran along to the entrance, slapping the walls, making her palms sting, crying out Stefnie's name.

She came to the entrance and saw at once that the twin iron doors, pitted and scarred with centuries of rust, were hanging open. A puddle

had formed on the tiles just inside. And she realised that she'd been able to hear the incessant hissing roar of the rain for some time.

Someone had turned off the forcefield.

Her legs trembling, Bernice walked slowly up to the entrance.

Through the gap, she could see something, humped just beyond the doorway.

A body.

Bernice stepped outside. She was soaked to the skin in seconds, but barely noticed.

Because lying on his back ten feet from the fort was one of Helsall's men. His throat had been cut. There was no blood on the body. The rain had washed it all away.

Bernice backed into the fort. Into someone standing right behind her. She swung round – and something hard hit her on the head, and she was gone.

Bernice is almost weeping with relief. The figure reaches the bottom of the ladder and reveals itself to be Stefnie.

'Stefnie,' croaks Bernice. 'Oh, Stefnie.'

The girl just stands there, a faceless shape in the greyness, watching. 'Stefnie? What's going on? Speak to me!'

There's a click, and light explodes from a torch Stefnie is holding, momentarily blinding Bernice. When her eyes adjust she can see Stefnie's face. It's cold, unsmiling, the eyes dark.

Her voice is colder. 'Speak to you? I spit on you!' And she does.

It lands on Bernice's neck, hot, like hate.

Bernice's mind races. Has Stefnie been deranged by the psychic attack? Bernice fights to keep her voice level. 'Stefnie, there's something about this planet that affects the mind.' An image of the *Galatea* zooming through the void pops into her head. 'Where are the others?'

Stefnie wades closer to Bernice. Her eyes are wide, her lips parted in a grin. 'Oh, they'll all be dead by now.'

Bernice swallows, her mouth painfully dry. She can barely talk, her voice hurts her. 'Stefnie, listen. Something's wrong, we have to get off this planet!'

'I have every intention of leaving,' whispers Stefnie. 'But you must stay.'

'What are you talking about?'

Stefnie looks as if she's going to spit again. 'I hate you and your kind. Always digging up the past. Nothing more than grave robbers!'

'Bollocks,' groans Bernice. 'Grave robbing is for personal gain. Archaeology's the pursuit of knowledge.'

'You're invading the past! Some things should never be known.'

Her words are beginning to make some kind of sense. 'You mean, you're protecting the secret of Squadborronfell?' Bernice's head swims in a sudden surge of nausea. 'Why? What's it to you?'

'It's everything to me,' says Stefnie. 'I am Sydiast.'

'Oh.' Despite her predicament, Bernice is suddenly very interested.

'That would explain a lot. So... who were your enemy?'

Stefnie bows her head, and Bernice can see her brow furrow. Is she crying? Her voice is hoarse. 'The enemy... the enemy...' She looks up at Bernice, eyes furious. 'They were a perversion! They had to die.'

'Stefnie, you've devoted your life to a battle which ended centuries ago.'

Stefnie seems to come to her senses as if remembering something important and imminent. 'It's not over yet. I am going to leave you now.' She grins. Bernice can see her enthusiasm shining through, only this time it's ghastly. 'This cell is quite water-tight. I've made sure of that. I've also made sure water is channelled in here. And it won't stop raining until the dry season, which isn't for some considerable time yet.'

'Why are you doing this to me?'

'You'll be an example to others who are foolish enough to come here.'

Bernice closes her eyes. 'The curse.'

'Yes, Professor Summerfield.' Stefnie traces a pattern in the surface of the water with her fingers. Her voice is full of scorn and hate. 'You might not believe in it, but it believes in you. This will be a new experience for you. A curse got you.'

And with that, she turns and climbs the ladder without a backwards glance.

When the hatch closes, Bernice is once more in darkness.

So, this is how it ends, thought Bernice, eyes wide open, seeing nothing but the flickering inside her own head. A slow, mad death in the darkness. She'd end up a ragged skeleton in chains, unable, like the battlefield, to reveal its secret.

How had a psycho like Stefnie slipped through the net? Bernice went back through the preparation for the expedition. Her application had been immaculate, her credentials unimpeachable. Perhaps, in retrospect, a little too perfect. But Bernice remembered with a rush of shame how, in the interview, Stefnie had said she was a fan of Bernice's, had read all her books, how this expedition would be such a great honour for her. *Flattery*. Bernice had indulged her vanity, and this was the result.

If she got out of this alive – which was doubtful – it was time for her to start putting a bit more distance between herself and her fans.

Suddenly the hatch opened again, and a figure climbed down the ladder.

Bernice shouted in surprise. This figure was bulkier, sloshing through the water towards her.

A flash of light. 'Professor Summerfield!'

Bernice squinted, and through her eyelashes saw a pale face, a uniform. A gun.

'Captain Helsall?!'

The face receded, and Bernice heard the whine of a laser cutter. She dimly registered that she was being rescued.

She felt her left arm come free, then the right, and cried out as pins-and-needles coursed through her. She fell on top of Helsall. They stumbled and splashed around, Bernice moaning. Her arms felt like over-stretched elastic, her legs like perished rubber.

'Can you stand?'

Bernice tried, and she could, just. Everything hurt. She lunged down and scooped handfuls of water into her mouth. It tasted earthy and gritty, but she needed it.

Her thirst slaked, Helsall helped her up the ladder and through the hatch. It was daylight, well, as light as it ever got on Farlorne, a stony grey washed with the never-ending rain.

Helsall half-dragged, half-carried Bernice to a nearby pillbox where they sheltered from the downpour. Bernice felt a sting in her forearm, and the soothing rush of painkiller through her veins. She leaned back against the cold, damp stone, closing her eyes.

When she spoke, her voice sounded miles away. 'How did you know I was in there?'

'Played dead. Followed the girl.'

Bernice dragged herself awake. She looked at the Captain.

Rainwater beaded his black eyebrows and there was a deep gash on his cheek, purged of blood by the rain, a pale flap of skin.

'Stefnie? Where is she now?'

Helsall pointed. A short distance away, a slim figure lay in the grass, face upwards. Bernice got to her feet, surprised at how easy walking was under the balm of the painkillers.

It was Stefnie, a neat black hole drilled in her forehead. Her eyes were open, pooling with water which ran down her cheeks in a grotesque parody of tears.

Summerfield lots, curses still nil.

She heard Captain Helsall squelch through the wet grass beside her. The cold rain helped Bernice to focus. Nothing made sense. What's going on?

Helsall's eyes searched her own. 'Last night, you felt... you weren't yourself?'

‘You can say that again.’

Helsall kicked Stefnie’s body. ‘It was her. Some drug she introduced into the crew’s water supply.’ His voice was calm and level as ever. ‘Massive fear and paranoia. Madness. Death. You didn’t have much of ours, as I recall. You were keeping your distance. That hip flask of yours.’

A rational explanation, then. It did nothing to soothe Bernice.

‘How did you survive? And how come you know so much about this?’

‘I had my own supplies. And I know because I know.’ He kicked Stefnie again. ‘Since we landed. It could have been one of the hired soldiers. But I never really thought it would be. I’ve known her kind a long time.’

Bernice felt herself swaying as her picture of Helsall finally completed itself. ‘You *knew*? You let me bring her on my mission and you *knew*?’

‘Your mission?’ Helsall began to stride away through the rain, like a grey ghost.

Bernice looked down at Stefnie. ‘Your battle’s not over, is it?’ she said through gritted teeth.

It took Bernice a while to catch up with Captain Helsall. Although the pain was temporarily at bay, she felt weak, and had to keep stopping, face up to the sky, drinking the rain.

She found him waiting by the ship’s entrance ramp, watching her approach. She could see dark humps around the ships. Waterlogged corpses.

‘Well?’ he said calmly. ‘Aren’t you going to thank me for saving your life?’

He had a point.

‘I’m sorry, Captain,’ she said, meeting his gaze. ‘Thank you.’

He nodded, and turned to walk up the ramp.

‘Wait!’ she called.

He turned back.

‘You’re from the other side, aren’t you? You’re still fighting the war, hundreds of years on! And you used me to get at Stefnie.’

Helsall looked pained. ‘The war is over, I hope. Stefnie was the last of her kind.’

Bernice marched on her cloud of pain suppressant right up to Helsall. He could beat her to death and she wouldn’t feel it, so she had nothing to lose. ‘Listen, I don’t really give a flying one about being taken for a ride just so you could win your war. But what I do care about are all these people.’ She gestured at the bodies strewn around the ship. ‘I got out alive. For which I am thankful. But these poor

bastards! What right had you to involve them?’

Helsall shrugged. ‘They were mercenaries. They knew the risks.’

Bernice felt like walloping him. ‘Look... all life...’ she sighed. He really looked like he couldn’t care less. ‘There had better be a pretty good explanation for all this,’ she muttered.

‘There is,’ he said. ‘I didn’t expect anyone to survive, so I didn’t plan on explaining anything.’ He smiled. For the first time. The expression somehow reminded Bernice of Stefnie. ‘But I think you’ve earned the right to hear it. You almost became a part of Squadborrowfell yourself.’

He looked like he seriously intended her to laugh. Suddenly Bernice saw herself as he must see her a non-combatant, a civvy, fit only for use as a pawn in his greater strategy.

She badly wanted a bath and coffee. But she also badly wanted to hear what Helsall had to say. ‘Whatever,’ she said offhandedly. ‘Go on, then. Try to justify all this terror and death.’

As the rain roared like an arena, Helsall spoke.

‘I am Sydiast,’ he began. ‘Stefnie and I are of the same race. Ten centuries ago, we dominated this sector. We had reached a state of genetic purity, and lived in peace. But something went wrong; a disease, a genetic mutation, I don’t know the scientific details. Half our race turned warlike and expansionist, wanted to conquer the galaxy. The other half only wanted peace, but were forced into war to stop their warlike brothers.’

He paused.

‘Ah. So... which lot do you belong to?’

He ignored her. ‘Our dominance of the sector waned. We began to wipe each other out.’ Helsall gestured beyond the veil of rain. ‘This was our last battlefield. Squadborrowfell.’

‘You cancelled each other out, like both sides of an equation,’ said Bernice.

Helsall frowned. ‘No, that’s not quite what happened. The pacifists decided that genocide was the only way out. They released a virus lethal to all Sydiast.’ He grimaced. ‘They committed suicide rather than let us win.’

Bernice felt a chill run along her body, despite the painkillers. ‘So... you’re one of the warmongers.’

His eyes were glaring, defiant. ‘I am descended from the militant faction, yes. Some survived, from each side. Deserters, off-planet skirmishers... only a few hundred, but enough to keep the war going.’

Bernice remembered. Stefnie’s face, both laughing and sneering.

‘All these centuries,’ she muttered. ‘So you and Stefnie are the last?’

‘As far as I know,’ said Helsall. ‘I set up this whole expedition to smoke her out. I sought you out especially, because of your high

profile. When she signed up, I had my suspicions, but couldn't act until she'd played her hand. I didn't know for sure until last night.'

'So you risked all our lives...' She held back her anger, knowing it would be wasted on him.

They stared at each other from either side of an unbridgeable divide of values, of morals, of duty.

Bernice's duty was to herself and to truth, and to life.

Helsall's was to his ancestors, and his war, and this battlefields relishing the solid – if soggy – ground, after days of zero-g.

She turned and grinned up at her fellow exld.

Well, at least they could agree on one thing.

Bernice walked up the ramp. 'Let's make sure this place stays a memorial,' she said to Helsall. 'The war's over, Captain. What are you going to do now?'

He didn't answer. He just strode up the ramp and into the *Galatea*.

Bernice held her breath as she followed, only letting it out again once the hatch had closed behind her, shutting out the roaring of the rains of Farlorne.

A sound she hoped never to hear again.

16: Taken by the Muses

By Steve Lyons

Okay, so this is the situation.

I'm sitting in a prison cell. Yeah, right, so what's new about that, you might well ask. You were just a minute ago as well. Well, okay, standing. Talk about not putting the 'Surprise' into a life of Surprises.

You know, if I'm ever tempted to think of myself as a wild and sexy adventurer, forever braving danger and having an exciting time with a flask at her hip and a sardonic smile on her lips... No, scratch that, that's how I *do* think of myself. Now and then, anyway. But what they don't tell you in pulp novels and comic books is that wild adventurers spend *a lot* of time locked up in small rooms, and that this is *the* dulllest condition known to humankind.

The key to coping with it is to keep your mind occupied. There's only so many times you can count the cracks in the paintwork or, in more extreme cases, the bloodstains on the floor. But that can be okay, because when you *are* a wild adventurer, forever braving etc., you don't get much quality time to yourself to think and here's where you can make up for it. I get most of my ideas for new books whilst sitting in some damp hovel waiting to be tortured or executed or just gloated at, and that's a good thing because book royalties go a fair way towards keeping me in gin and travel expenses for my *next* wild adventure. In fact, if it weren't for the cognitive gap between an idea and a publishing deadline Of course, I forget most of them by the time I've been through the obligatory hair-raising escape.

But I'm wandering off the subject, dear diary. Let me return to the basics.

I'm in a prison cell, a few floors beneath an alien temple. It's cold.

And I'm awaiting trial for what I'm told is a very serious crime.

I'm meant to be collecting my thoughts before I'm collected myself and taken to be judged by the Great Muse. Oh, I should probably fill in some background details. The Muses are android priests, right? They have limited telepathic abilities, which means they can read your surface thoughts. That's pretty useful when they're trying to find out if you've been a naughty girl or not. In fact, in their time – which was long ago now, but we'll come to that – the Muses were said to dispense infallible justice. Which would be fine and dandy with me, were it not for the inconvenient fact that I'm guilty as sin.

So the door to my cell flies open and in walks this android, this Muse.

It's dressed in white robes and a red hat that looks like a folded napkin, and it's carrying a staff. The Muse itself is humanoid but built like a skeleton, all joints and pistons. Its face is a smooth oval, which is a bit disconcerting. I'm not a big fan of humanoid androids at the best of times, because they never *move* like humans. They don't give off non-verbal signals. Like this guy: no face, so you can't see what he's thinking. Not that androids think, and they don't understand sarcasm, but you know what I mean.

So, this Muse speaks in a voice like Mr Moviefone – sorry, that's an obscure twentieth-century popular culture reference, I'm told I make too many of those – and he says: 'You have the option to confess, to your past acts of sinfulness.'

'I aim to prove my innocence,' I say, 'so your advice makes little sense.'

'My role is that of Holy Priest; you can confide in me at least.'

'If you think I'm going to cough, then you can damn well bugger off.'

'A charge most serious you face: you trespassed in our holy place.'

'Let me state in a way categorical...' This is starting to get awkward, '...that my interest in this was purely historical.'

I get these impulses sometimes to agree to mad ideas, and one day I'll learn to ignore them. Deep down, I think it suits me to be someone whose life is forever plagued by excitement, and it does get so that I feel penned in on Brax's asteroid. So when an old friend of mine from the University of Vremnya asked if I could chaperone a few of her students on a field trip, I didn't hesitate for half as long as I should have done. She'd pulled a few strings, you see, and landed us the opportunity to be present when a recently excavated temple on a dustball of a planet called Lyra was opened up. Well, it turns out that tickets to this event weren't quite as hotly contested as I was led to believe, and the entire party consists of me, four students and two geeks who spend most of their time slobbering over me the two archaeologists who actually made the discovery. The latter were embarrassingly happy to see me, as if having someone present whose name had appeared on a book cover validated their entire expedition and lives. They even suggested, once they'd forced open the temple doors, that I lead the way inside. Another mad idea, as it turned out.

The thing, you see, is this: the Muses worship the religion of their creators. They were programmed to accept every line of their Holy Book as immutable fact. Which makes it hard to argue with them, when said creators have been dead for centuries. No one expected these buggers to still be up and running, but there they were inside the temple, just going about their daily routines: preparing altars for nobody, saying prayers, being pious and all that. In their little robot

hearts they were probably quite chuffed, I imagine, to find a real live non-believer breaking into their most sacred building. Something for them to do at last.

Now they've turned out in force to get a good look at me. As I'm led out of my cell, the corridors I don't have to describe them do I? are lined with dozens of Muses. There's no chance of escaping, then, as any one of them could twist my head right off. That's kind of why I let them lock me up in the first place.

We end up, of course, in the courtroom. The walls are made of orange sandstone blocks with green slime dribbling down them. There are electronic candles – which, to my mind, defeats the object and are also very disco – everywhere, and it's cold, colder even than my cell was. I suppose androids don't have much use for heat. I'm told to stand behind a wooden bench, with a Muse to each side of me and the one who brought me here in front.

At the far end of the room, there's an altar, and sitting behind that, or rather hanging over it, is the Great Muse. He's a larger – much larger – version of the small Muses, except that he's immobile, wired into the wall with his arms spread out behind him. It's all very biblical.

He turns his head to stare at me – he's got no eyes, but I *know* he's staring, okay? – and if the lesser Muses can read my surface thoughts, then this thing looks like it could take my brain apart telepathically. In a deep booming voice that makes my stomach tremble, he asks: 'Has the accused betrayed her crimes?'

And my Muse – if you can call him that – answers, 'She has not faltered in her rhymes. And yet, her sinfulness is clear.'

'Then her verse must be tested here. To start, your name must be revealed.'

It takes me a second to realise that he's addressing me. Fortunately, he's bowled me an easy one to begin with. 'Professor Bernice Summerfield'

'Now, your true age we must divine.'

'That's none of your business!' I respond automatically. 'Er... you nosy swine.'

'This court will now move to assess, the extent of your past sinfulness.'

Ah, here's one I prepared earlier. 'I'm confident that, in your God's sight, I'll get my rhymes and metre right.'

'If you are wrong, you can be sure,' says the Great Muse, 'that you will live to rhyme no more. An afterlife of pain you'll earn, for as a heretic you'll burn.'

Uh-huh. Pretty much as I'd figured, then.

Here's something I should have mentioned earlier. The original Holy Book of the Lyrans was, rather tragically, a volume of nursery rhymes accidentally left behind by alien visitors. Kind of Erich von Daniken meets Enid Blyton. The book was added to over time, but always in verse. So, as far as the Muses are concerned, it is divine to rhyme. 'Assonance is next to godliness' (Mother Duck 2:14). And they believe that the sinful reveal themselves by being unable to recite poetry under scrutiny. All of which means I have to keep on my toes.

Now, false modesty aside, I think I'm pretty quick-witted, but as 'my' Muse steps up to take over the questioning, I soon realise how hard it is to talk for your life and pick out rhyming words at the same time.

'Your thoughts reveal that you have lived in an unholy way,' says the priest.

And I answer: 'I always try to do my best: a good deed every day.'

'You often drink yourself into an alcoholic stupor.'

'It helps me to relax.' I cringe as I hear myself saying: 'I think it's really... rather super.'

'Your carnal lusts have driven you to sex without wedlock.'

'If you mean that guy on Beta Max, he had a massive...'

'Where I come from, those actions wouldn't land you in the dock.'

'Then your people are heathens; you all must be purified.'

'How can it be my fault if everyone around me lied?'

'You are claiming that you are a product of indoctrination?'

'Yes, but now I've seen the light, I'll join your congregation!'

'Within your thought, the falsehood of your vow is brightly lit.'

Oh the bastard. The falsehood of my what? How do you light a vow? That, frankly, is me stuffed. All my carefully laid plans down the drain. So, it doesn't matter now that I've been thrown the easiest rhyme in the world, I've got too many other things to think about, and much to my horror, dear diary, my mind goes blank. Blanker than a very blank thing. The seconds tick by, which makes me all the more flustered because I know I have to say something now and my tongue is dry and I can't find any words at all, until in the end I plump for

'Oh... shit shit this shit shit shit shit shit shit shit *shit!*'

You know how sometimes you look back on something you've said and wish you could have been a tad more eloquent?

The other Muses – they're still here, by the way, lined up around the walls – gasp in this sanctimonious, oh-she's-really-given-herself-away-there kind of a way. Although actually, I suppose they wouldn't do that, being robots, so perhaps it's just my imagination.

'The use of obscene language is a societal canker,' says toy inquisitor, and I open my mouth again and blurt out the first thing that comes to me.

Well, he was asking for it.

But the imaginary gasps grow louder, and he proclaims:

‘Your words condemn you! You have eaten from the devil’s orange!’

...Of course that would be the condemning line. Works every time.

But I manage a snappy comeback. ‘That’s not fair, you metal... git!’

This has turned nasty all of a sudden. I realise that, while I’m on the defensive like this, I can hardly do anything but land myself in trouble.

I need to turn things around. So, before the Muse can say anything else, I jump in and I tell him he’s giving me the wrong kind of rhyme, that I actually specialise in limericks. And, still thinking on my feet, I offer him the first example I can think of. ‘Er... There was a young girl who liked dockers...’

‘Is this poem intended to shock us?’ he asks.

‘It isn’t *that* rude!’ says I.

‘It is sinfully lewd.’

‘Trust a robot to put on the mockers.’

I say: ‘The race that built you is long dead, so word of your God can’t be spread. If ignorance is my only crime, I don’t think for that I should do time.’ And then I realise that if I ask a question, I can force this Muse to rhyme with *me*, and buy myself some time to think. So I add: ‘If your God is so good, why did he let his chosen people die?’

‘Their prayers did not please Him, they were slow to versify.’

‘You mean you killed them all? You think that’s reasonable behaviour?’

‘We purified their souls so they could dwell beside our saviour.’

This goes on for a while, and I’m thinking as hard as I can, but I’m not thinking of anything very useful. The best I can come up with is that I might have a chance if I can trip this guy up, but he’s programmed to find rhymes in a thousand different languages. I already know that. Even when I try the ‘orange’ trick against him, he turns around all straight-faced – yeah, yeah, no face, I know – and says:

‘You deserve to be cast into the flame pits of Boranj.’

I accuse him of making that up, but then they show me a picture of said pits, which of course they’ve deliberately constructed themselves, and during this explanation I use another very bad word.

At last, the Great Muse sums up, which basically means that he reminds everyone of the most embarrassing moments of the past few minutes. I keep trying to interject: ‘You see, what I meant to say there was... that’s a very special sort of rhyme called assonance... anyone heard of blank verse?... and that rhymes in Turkish!’ – but he’s having none of it.

‘Your guilt is clear,’ he says. ‘You must, I fear, receive our condemnation. But you may take this chance to make a final declaration.’

Last chance then, dear diary. I stand up straight and clear my throat and very much to my surprise, the words just come into my head.

Addressing the Great Muse directly, I recite:

‘You must adapt, you’ve been sealed up for many a long season,

‘You need to temper your beliefs with less rhyme and more reason.

‘Yes, I’ve abused my body with a plethora of liquors,

‘And I may have been a bit too quick to drop my knickers

And I’ve done things that would offend a temple full of vicars,

‘But I came here in solemn peace, I’ve never wished a person ill.

‘Apart from my ex husband, but

‘And frankly, of your accusations I have had my fill.

‘I’ve tried to see your point of view, so do the same for me,

‘Just live and let live, open up your doors and fairly set me free.

‘Good will to all has always been my primary intent [stress on the ‘ent’]

‘So, I pray you, think again; what’s your verdict?’

Well, what can the Great Muse say to that? He thinks about it, but the other Muses are starting to get figety, as if wondering why he doesn’t just complete the rhyme as he’s programmed to do. A couple of them look like they’re ready to take him apart nut by nut to see what’s up with him if he doesn’t speak soon. So, finally, in a tone of voice as reluctant as any you’ve ever heard from but no, that’s a *stupid* ending

‘Heaven-sent,’ says the Great Muse.

‘Eh?’ says I.

‘Is my responsibility to punish those who stray. And for your crimes against our God, you must be seen to pay.’

‘Oh. I see. You can break your own rules when you want to. Fine. Innocent! You were meant to say Innocent! Or Not Guilty would have been fine!’

‘I have no option, I must now employ our final sanction: from this time on, we will not bear your miserable scansion.’

‘Hang on,’ I protest. “Sanction” and “scansion”?’

So, it’s back down the corridors with my metal priest friend and, with an odd kind of detachment, I’m wondering whether the means of my execution will rhyme or not. Will they boil me in oil, set me afire on a pyre, stretch my back on a rack or what? Imagine my surprise, then, when we arrive back at the main entrance to the temple and the Muse simply lets go of me.

‘As you refuse to see God’s light; he says, ‘you must be cast far from

his sight.'

'I don't understand.' I can't be bothered to rhyme any more. What's the point? 'You mean "cast from his sight" in a "gory and painful death" kind of way, right?'

'Your punishment has been explained. Our leader, the Great Muse ordained that you will pass beyond this door and wander far, to rhyme no more.'

Ah. So, apparently I've been seeing unpleasant euphemisms where none existed. 'You're telling me,' I say, still trying to grasp this concept, 'that I can just go; that I've got away with it?' The Muse gives me a look that I'm sure is meant to be disapproving, and I quickly add:

'I mean, apart from the fact that I'll ultimately burn in the fires of Hell, obviously.'

'And should you ever form a verse to bring yourself to God's attention, then your fate will be far worse: the gory, painful death you mention.'

Which is all fine by me, because no Muse is likely to catch *me* rhyming again. Not given that I plan to get away from this planet as far and as fast as I sodding well can. As we pass through the temple doors, I can already see my shuttlecraft ahead of me. No sign of the students or the geeks though, which probably means they've decided to leave me to it and have piled into the ship for protection. I hope my escort doesn't get much closer to them or they're likely to hit the ignition switch in panic and leave me stranded.

I start to pull away from him, and he says: 'Before you leave, let me explain that if we should see you again, you can expect the very worst.'

'Yeah, yeah,' I snort derisively, half under my breath, 'Not if I see you first.'

As he stops dead in his tracks, I realise what I've said and start running.

Exit Bernice Surprise Summerfield, pursued by a barrage of deadly blaster fire.

Oh, did I forget to mention that the Muses have deadly blaster weapons?

All right, dear diary, I admit it, none of the above really happened.

Nothing after the cell, anyway. I'm still there, in fact, bored out of my skull. I've counted all the bloodstains and, as I said, I'm trying to keep my mind occupied.

I wanted to tell you about the exciting things that have happened to me so far today and what I intend to do next, but I can hardly write it all down yet, can I? Because anything you take down yourself might

be used in evidence against you and that'd be your own bloody stupid fault. So, I thought I'd try to get one of those book ideas down on paper for once, just start writing and see what flows out of my pen.

Well, it passed the time anyway

There's somebody outside the door, dear diary. Looks like I'm about to be dragged off. I expect there'll be plenty of torture and gloating and daring escapes and gunfire and probably lots and lots of running. I'll tell you all about it when it's over.

The truth next time, I promise.

Oh. I was after a witty ending there. But I can't think of anything that rhymes with 'promise'.

Damn.

17: The Spartacus Syndrome

By Jonathan Morris

Gah.

Colours. Shapes. Sounds and smells. Waking is a question of first bringing the mind into focus, then peering through the morning fog into the surrounding world. Bernice Summerfield had woken up in some strange places. She had woken face-down on the wretched, sticky floors of bars, with a sensation of gulped nausea that told her she really, really didn't want to cough. She had woken in the holds of industrial spaceships, the engines thud-thudding through her spine.

She had woken up in unfamiliar beds, on unfamiliar planets, with people she couldn't imagine ever being familiar with. She had even woken up in her own bed, surrounded by *Pisa* towers of unread books, unwashed laundry and bottles of unfinished wine.

This time was different. She couldn't shake the bleary, distracted sensation of slumber from her brain. She found it hard to concentrate, to bring her thoughts together, to *think*. She struggled to remember her last memory, but nothing made itself available. She knew she was awake, yes, but very little else.

Gah.

A mattress she didn't recognise pressed into her back. As she opened her eyes, she saw some jiggling objects in bright, primary colours, suspended above her by a rod. Some of them had smiling, nodding faces.

She could smell disinfectant and other sharp, clean smells. Fabric conditioner, scented like peaches. Talcum powder. And a sickly, unclean odour she didn't want to recognise.

Some of the jiggling objects made sounds. Clear, high-pitched chings. As she listened, Bernice could hear the whoosh of air in her eardrums and the lub-dup of her heart.

She put out an arm to reach one of the objects. The objects dangled frustratingly out of reach of her chubby hand. They wobbled happily at her.

Where am I? What has happened to me? Bernice struggled to sit up, but her movements were too unco-ordinated. Frustrated, she fell back and swallowed. Her mouth felt parched. She needed water.

Gah.

She couldn't even speak. Her tongue just flopped about uselessly.

She couldn't form words or sentences. Instead, spittle bubbled on her lips. Meanwhile, a horrible clammy wetness insinuated itself down

the inside of her legs.

What, thought Bernice, did I have to *drink* last night?

Benny elbowed the entry pad and the bulkhead door slid open with a begrudging whoosh. She dived through, performed a forward roll and landed on her thigh with a painful thump. Bugger. Her rucksack strap had twisted around her shoulder and a stitch jabbed into her side.

Bugger again.

She lurched to her feet, shrugged her bag into place, and breathed in the oily scent of burning hair. With a yelp, she slapped her head, her palms flattening out the flames, her fingers patting the remains of her fringe. When all this was over, she'd have to make a visit to the hairdresser's. Hopefully the damage could be repaired. She didn't want to spend the next month fending off butch women and men who fancied butch women. Bugger a third time.

The corridor flashed a horror-movie red and clattered and shook.

Benny reeled and lurched and banged against the metal walls. Down here, she could feel the vibration of the ship's engines. Squinting in the alternating blackness and gore, she spotted an EMERGENCY EXIT and heaved herself towards it.

The Finshargles' bootsteps clanged behind her. She could hear them shouting, their language a series of clicks and gurgles that resembled a broken plumbing system. One gave an indignant flushing and launched a spurt of laser bolts over her head. They impacted with the ducting, creating bangs of sparks. They didn't want to hit her, Benny reminded herself; they didn't want to risk damaging the property. She hoped. She patted her jacket and touched the corners of the cassette box. It was safe. Well, as safe as she was.

Hoarse with exhaustion, she reached the EMERGENCY EXIT, elbowed the entry pad and waited for the hatchway to telescope open.

Her heart was thudding and she desperately wanted to double up, throw up, and not walk for several days.

She squeezed through the hatch, piled into the booth, and thumped the pad marked LAUNCH. A metallic grinding started and bolts slid out of place. The door behind her rotated shut like a camera iris. For a moment Benny glimpsed the Finshargles, their features caught in a demonic red. Two squat humanoids, each with a narrow, glistening, scaly face, their eyes set way back on either side, dead gutting-slab eyes. Huge mouths, lined with thousands of comb-thin teeth, extending all the way back to the hinge at the rear of the neck.

Fixed, malicious smiles. No nose, no ears, no hair. Just a single antenna drooping over the front of the head, upon which hung a small, glowing nub.

They gave an angry, gutter-swilling gush as the door slammed shut

and the escape capsule launched. Benny felt the floor drop away beneath her, or rather, beneath the capsule. There was the sudden sensation of falling...

Bernice's tongue had been pasted to the roof of her mouth. She chewed to moisten it free and it nudged against an uneven ridge of teeth. Odd, she thought, and drifted back into muzziness.

Her brain suddenly kicked itself. Her teeth? What had happened to her *teeth*? Bernice opened her eyes and hauled herself upright. The room smelt of must and sweat. As she wedged herself against the headboard, her body felt unusually sluggish. There were twinges all over, down her chest, around her knees.

She blinked but her vision didn't clear. To her left, a chink in the drapes let in the morning. Bernice reached out towards the table-shaped object and her fingers met with a lamp. After an age of fumbling, she switched it on.

The room became a dreary haze. Even after rubbing her eyes, Bernice couldn't make out anything more than a few inches away.

Some dust swirled in the light. Her body sprawled out below her. She gazed in horror at the crumpled sheets and the shape they mapped out.

There was the sensation of a spider crawling over her cheeks. She reached up to scratch her skin and her fingers touched bristles. She traced their shape. A beard. A thick beard. She rubbed and rubbed but the spider continued its prickly wanderings.

She reached out to the bedside table and collected a pair of spectacles. Fixing them on, the blur became a bedsit. The grubby floortiles outside one of the doors suggested a bathroom.

Something ached down below. A laden sensation just above her groin. She desperately needed to go to the toilet. Instinctively, she squeezed her legs together and trapped something soft and sensitive inbetween.

Bernice winced.

Her bladder was insistent. She had to go. She climbed carefully out of the bed, her back creaking, and padded over to the bathroom. The tiles were icy against the slap of her feet. She peered into the shaving mirror. A man in his seventies peered back with an expression of disgust. His mouth hung open revealing dirty teeth and his skin was pockmarked and lined.

'Oh no,' said a man's voice. Bernice started and spun around, then realised that she had been the one who had been speaking. 'Oh. No.'

She listened to herself. She sounded like churning gravel. 'Bloody. Hell.'

Her bladder reminded her of her duty. Agonisingly, she reached

down and unbuttoned the pyjama bottoms.

That done, she gathered up a couple of yards of toilet paper and bandaged it around her hands. Then, tight-lipped, breath held, she reached for the thing beneath the trousers.

As the urine drummed against the porcelain, Bernice struggled to remember how she had ended up like this. She had not gone to sleep in this state, she was sure. No, there was a ill-defined gap in her memory. A blankness. The last thing she remembered was her meeting with the soc-reel dealer at the Witch and Whirlwind.

‘You weren’t quite what I expected, Professor,’ said the soc-reel dealer. A smile flirted with his lips.

‘Really?’

The dealer paused as the student barmaid delivered the drinks and disappeared back into the laughing, clinking darkness. ‘To begin with, I was under the impression that you were on a tour of Murgatroyd and would not be returning to Dellah for two months.’ He lifted his glass and sniffed it.

‘A cover story.’ On the other side of the table, a gin was knocked back. ‘A ruse. I don’t want the university sticking their noses into my business.’

‘Of course.’ The dealer swallowed his drink with a mixture of curiosity and tonic. ‘I must confess, though, reading your bio, I was expecting someone somewhat... older.’

‘I’ve been looking after myself.’

The dealer finished his drink. ‘And possibly larger.’

‘I’ve been on a diet.’

‘And male.’

‘Art has no gender,’ said Benny, nodding at the barmaid for the same-again. ‘The artist more so. But I felt it important, that in order to stretch myself, I should get in touch with my feminine side. So I had my gender realigned. Minor surgery. Cosmetic.’ She accepted the drinks. ‘Nobody’s perfect.’

‘And has it worked?’

Benny took mock offence. ‘Well, you can see the results for yourself.’ She hesitated. ‘Though obviously, not *all* of the results. That wasn’t an offer.’

‘You misunderstand me, Professor Stokes.’ The dealer looked her up and down intensely. His eyes paused at her chest to scan left and right. ‘The operation was obviously a... modest success. Though I’m surprised you did not choose an appearance more feminine.’

Now the offence was genuine. It had been bad enough when that first-year had suggested that she might allow him to *convert* her to the joys of heterosexuality. Or at least to let him watch. She chose her

words carefully. 'One doesn't want to overcompensate.'

'What I meant was, has it improved your work as an artist?'

'Oh. To approach the canvas as a female woman? It's still early days yet. I'm only just getting used to the underwear.' She drained the last of the gin. 'Anyway. You didn't come here to listen to me spouting on about my genius.'

'Indeed,' said the dealer, a little too keenly. As his expression softened, the body projection around him blurred and pixelated.

Benny had the momentary impression of serrated teeth, flat eyes, and a limply dangling bulb. Then the hologram returned to the generic businessman-in-a-suit-and-tie.

'Have you got the...?' hinted Benny, half-whispering.

'The property. Yes.' The dealer click-clicked his briefcase and retrieved a small cassette from within. He handed it to her, maintaining eye contact.

'This is it?'

The dealer nodded.

Benny revolved the cassette in her hand, then placed it gingerly on the beer-soaked table. 'Do you sell a lot of these? I mean, d'you have many clients? What do other people use these soc-reels for?'

The dealer leaned forward, creating a brief impression of scales and flattened eyes. 'Numerous reasons. To populate virtual reality immersions. As models for sociological research. As executive toys. For study, for entertainment. For art. We have provided content for several installations.'

'Good,' said Benny. 'I think we can do business.' She weighed up the cassette, inspected the label, then handed it back. 'One more question. Where do you get them from?'

Bernice curled up, her cheek brushing against the fur pillow. She nuzzled it, stretching her legs, enjoying the feel of the silk against her skin. She rolled on to her side, opening her eyes to the brightness of the dawn streaming through the blinds.

She was lying naked in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar bedroom. Looking down, her body seemed unfamiliar. Her breasts were too large. Her waist was too curvy. Her legs were too long. She seemed to have four feet.

Her eyes drifted up the legs of the person lying next to her. A woman in her twenties, slim, pale, with long blonde hair. She was muttering in her sleep, indignant at some bad dream. Her features were unflawed, with plucked eyebrows and pursed, full lips. She stroked the pillow, softly moaning, then woke up with a snort.

Bernice stared at her. The woman stared back. Their gazes met and held for the longest time.

‘What,’ said the woman slowly but furiously, ‘the hell,’ she dragged the sheet over her breasts, ‘are you doing here?’ She glared at her, her face reddening, pulling her knees up to her chest.

Bernice glared back, covering herself with the pillow. ‘That,’ she said, ‘was exactly what I was going to ask you.’

‘What do you mean?’ accused the woman, trembling with anger.

‘What do I mean?’

‘What do you mean,”that was exactly what I was going to ask you”?’

Bernice padded on to the carpeted floor and draped a dressing gown over herself with a flourish. She tightened the cord and knotted it and knotted it again. ‘I mean, what the hell are you doing in bed with me?’

‘What am I doing in bed with *you*?’ said the woman incredulously.

‘What are you doing in bed with *me*, yes.’

The woman looked at her like she was an unhousetrained dog.

‘Who the hell are you, anyway?’

‘Who the hell am I?’ said Bernice, her temper flaming. ‘Who they hell are *you*?’

The woman swung herself out of bed and pulled a t-shirt over her head. ‘*I*,’ she said, ‘am Professor Bernice Summerfield.’

‘Don’t be bloody stupid,’ said Bernice. ‘*I’m* Professor Bernice Surnmerfield.’

‘I think I know who I am,’ said the woman condescendingly.

‘I think I know who *I* am. I’m Bernice Summerfield.’

‘*I’m* Bernice Summerfield.’

Bernice suddenly looked down at the bed. The crumpled sheets.

The disorganised pillows. Then she looked up at the woman. A terrible realisation dawned.

‘Oh no,’ they said together. ‘We *didn’t*, did we?’

In the control room the ship’s engines were reduced to a booming throb. Dashboard illuminations flashed, computers whirled and floor grilles clanged under the heavy, pissed-off footsteps of the Finshargles.

Commandant Wookle leaned over the control monitor, his breath misting the screen and speckling it with phlegm. He let out a weary hiss and turned to his second-in-command, Poon.

‘We are approaching the ground-layer of the planet.’ Poon gurgled, his tooth-lined features caught in the green instrument glow.

‘Entering deceleration spiral.’

Wookle looked back at the schematic of the planet’s surface. A dozen continents silhouetted against a murky blue. ‘A stowaway! A stowing-away thing! She should have been located. And made into a dead-cooked thing!’

Poon’s angler-nub lit up as he surveyed his control panel. ‘Odd.

There is a... residual mind-brain imprimatur in the induction matrix, Commandant.'

'She was the last one to use it!' Wookle watched his own nub bob about at the top of his field of vision. 'It must be hers. Stands to reason.'

Poon nodded and read from the screen-scroll. 'She was not *Menlove*. She was... *Professor Bernice Summerfield*.' The names sounded incongruous, spoken in the clumsy human tongue rather than the poetic swilling and gargling of Finsharglese.

'Whoever she wooshing is, she stole the soc-reel, Under-Commandant Poon. We must get it back. By all measures!' Wookle looked at the induction recorder, at its empty cassette slot hanging open like a disappointed mouth.

'Yes, Commandant.' Poon crossed the control room. 'We will be land-falling in one of the population centres in just under four minutes.'

'We must locate her. We must recover the soc-reel.' Wookle cleared his throat. 'Wait. You said you had her residual mind-brain imprimatur?'

'Yes, Commandant.'

'Then perform a sweep-scan of the planet, crossmatched with the imprimatur. We will be able to locate her by her brain-pattern!' The Commandant leaned back into his chair with an air of satisfaction. 'It will be like looking for a needle in a room with nothing else in it except for one very large and very obvious needle.'

'Very good, Commandant.' Poon waved a fin over the instrument pads.

On the dark blue map, a small yellow dot appeared on the coastline of one of the landmasses.

'There,' gushed Wookle victoriously. 'There she is!'

Another small yellow dot blinked on the other side of the map.

'Another one?' Wookle's angler-nub flashed in fury. 'What is occurring?'

One after another, more small yellow dots pinpricked all over the continents. Soon there were so many small yellow dots they formed into bright patches and splashes. Towns. Cities.

'I performed a sweep-scan of the planet,' explained Poon.

'Searching for humans with mind-brain imprimaturs identical to that of Professor Summerfield.'

'And?!'

'And,' said Poon slowly, 'there appear to be eight billion of them. Everyone. Every man, woman and child. Everyone on the planet seems to be... Professor Bernice Summerfield. At the same time.'

'But...' Wookle stroked his nub absently. 'Of course. That explains

why her scan was in the induction matrix. But the original, the *real* Professor must also be there somewhere.' Wookle regarded the map suspiciously. 'We must locate her, Poon. We must stop at nothing in doing so.'

'Yes, Commandant,' Poon agreed.

'We will search. It may be like finding a needle in a room full of identical-looking needles, but we will get her in the end. We. Wooshing. Shall!'

The windows rattled. A vrooming filled the air, the sound of a thousand furious vacuum cleaners. Shielding her eyes against the dust, Bernice struggled outside on to the scrubby lawn. The door slammed and banged behind her. Across the street, dozens of people had left their houses to stumble out into the road. A crowd congregated in the town square; some shouting, some arguing, many clutching bottles and cans. All of them gazing upwards.

Bernice squinted into the brilliant sky.

A vast spaceship hung directly overhead like a black, heavy, armour-plated cloud. Grime and soot covered its riveted, ugly bulk.

Antennae bristled across its undercarriage. On one side of the ship was a giant funnel, almost twice the size of the craft itself.

The dust storm grew sharper. People backed away as the craft descended with a roar, growing ever larger, casting a shadow and a sudden coolness over the street. Soon it extended to the horizon.

Bernice wiped her eyes. It had halted no more than a few yards above the highest chimney-top. She could make out the details of the meteorite pock-marks on its surface.

And she'd thought that waking up as a fifty-year-old woman would have been the most surprising thing to happen to her today.

Suddenly, the vacuum cleaners were switched off and an expectant hush fell over the crowd. Arguments halted mid-sentence. Drinks were swallowed in silence.

With a clashing boom, a megaphone was switched on. It screeched with feedback before settling down to a hum. A deep voice gurgled out of it: 'Attention. We have come here for the human Professor Bernice Summerfield. Will Bernice Summerfield please step forward.'

Bernice stared up at this ship, mouth agape. The crowd did likewise. Every single person shook their head in slow disbelief.

A stringy man in a t-shirt stepped forward and waved. 'I'm Bernice Summerfield!' he yelled defiantly.

A dumpy woman in a flowery dress elbowed him aside. 'No, *I'm* Bernice Summerfield!'

The crowd erupted. People waved, screamed, heckled and shouted.

'I'm Bernice Summerfield!', 'No, *I'm* Bernice Summerfield!', 'No, I'm

Bernice Summerfield. And so's my wife!

The megaphone boomed over the uproar with an air of bored resignation. 'We are only interested in the *real* Bernice Summerfield. Will she please step forward?'

As one, the entire crowd stepped forward.

Bernice wanted to call out, to scream that *she* was the real Bernice Summerfield. The spaceship, whoever it belonged to, could easily destroy this town. She wanted to give herself up, to save all of these innocent people, and yet they were all protecting her. Why? What had she done to deserve this?

'Over here!' called a familiar voice.

Bernice looked around. Standing in the middle of the lawn was a short, bright-eyed woman in her thirties. Her clothes – a jacket and jeans – were caked in mud. She swung a rucksack over one shoulder.

Her hair had been cropped into clumps. She had a weary, no-sleep-for-two-days air, but smiled with a determined cheerfulness.

Bernice recognised her. It was like facing a mirror. The woman walking towards *her*... it was her. Or rather, the body approaching her was the body that she had inhabited before being transplanted into a frumpy, grey-haired old dear.

The woman halted a few yards away and glanced up at the spaceship as though it was nothing to worry about.

'Who are you?' said Bernice eventually.

The woman grinned a cocky grin. 'Around here it's become something of a cliché.'

'I think you'll find that I'm –' began Bernice.

'No,' stated the woman. 'Look at me. I'm Benny Summerfield. The real Benny Summerfield. All you other Benny Summerfields are just... imitations.'

'What?' said Bernice.

'You won't understand,' sighed Benny. 'You probably won't remember anything after the Witch and Whirlwind, right? Come on,' she smiled, opening the front door, 'It's time I explained what the hell's going on over a cool drink.'

It's like this. The last thing you'll remember was the meeting with the soc-reel dealer. What's a soc-reel? I'll get to that. Why was I posing as Stokes? Because I needed a cover. As you know, I – we! – have a bit of a *reputation*. The sort of reputation that means if you're looking for trouble, it sees you coming. Not much good for catching trouble red-handed.

Would you like one? Ice? Of course, you're *me*, aren't you? Say when. Where was I? Oh, Braxiatel put me... *us*, I suppose, on to it. You remember? Remember that he'd heard a rumour that the Lost

Civilisation of Wakafroon had turned up? The point being, of course, that Lost Civilisations – particularly capitalised ones – don't just *turn up*.

If they do, it's after research, excavation. You don't expect to find them in the back of your sock drawer. But apparently it had. Turned up, I mean. No, not *literally* in a sock drawer, no.

You see, well, I'd better forward-track. The soc-reel dealer, he was a Finshargle. They have this scam going. They offer *civilisations for sale*.

Yes, whole civilisations. You pay the money, you get the culture, the knowledge, the *people*. The whole population in one convenient package. And he had quite a package, I mean, quite a catalogue. The Denizens Of Oop. The Apostles Of Grath. The Bottle City Of Kandor.

All these missing, ancient civilisations. For *sale*.

But those weren't the only ones. Did you hear about Glostar Pi? No?

I must've found out about that later. Glostar Pi was an unremarkable colony. Population ten million. Then, one day, it vanished. Not the people, I mean, they were all still there. But something had *happened* to them. Their minds – don't laugh – their minds had been *stolen*. Because what was left over was *mindless*, it died. They all died. Everyone, overnight.

What the Finshargles do is this: they go around planets, stealing the minds of everyone on the planet. They sort of *suck* all of the consciousnesses – the mind-brain imprimaturs, what we'd call consciousnesses – out of people's heads, using that big funnel thing, and stick them on to a convenient portable storage medium. End result, a planet full of mindless corpses and an entire civilisation stored on tape. Yes, a *tape*. An ordinary cassette. Which can then be sold, one day, to the highest bidder.

Who buys them? All sorts. Turns out some rich kid was using the Ancient Sea-Druids Of Farxant as cannon fodder in some computer game. He didn't realise they'd once been real people. Others have been used as lab-rats. It's pretty horrific what's been going on, actually.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, I smuggled myself away on their ship. I was too late to stop them 'inducting' all of the minds of everyone on this planet, but I managed to get hold of the mix. The *soc-reel*. Yes, I've got it here. However, there wasn't time to put all of the personalities *back* into everyone's heads. It was all a bit of a rush.

So I... well, I programmed the machine to stick *me* into everyone's heads instead. My personality, my memories and experiences. I was interrupted just before it finished, which is why you don't remember anything after the Whirlwind.

I had to do it. If I'd left everyone as they were, they'd have died. At least this way, there would be copies of me acting as sort of...

temporary body-sitters. I panicked. So that's why you're me, rather than you, if you get me. Another?

What do you mean, you don't believe a word of it?

'It's not that I don't believe you,' said Bernice cautiously. 'It just seems a bit, well, implausible.'

Benny stared at her for a few seconds, considered, then rummaged in her jacket. She retrieved a cassette box and placed it on the table.

'There. The proof.'

Bernice read the inlay. 'Kajagoogoo?'

'That's just the box.' Benny opened it, holding the tape at fingertip.

'On this soc-reel are the consciousnesses, the *minds* of every single person from this planet. Do you have a tape player?'

'Sorry?'

'Have you seen a tape player about the place? Here –' Benny spotted the stereo in one corner of the living room. She clicked open the compartment and inserted the tape. She pressed play and adjusted the volume. 'Listen.'

Bernice listened. The only sound was a shhh of static. Then, in the background, she heard a whispering. A sibilant whispering. Then a man's voice, too quiet to make out the words. Another voice, a woman, sobbing, gasping, imploring. A elderly woman, counting to herself. More voices rose up, some laughing, some crying, some shouting. Some screamed. Some pleaded and begged. More and more voices joined in the chorus, dozens, hundreds, until it was impossible to make out individual voices and it became a constant, whooshing roar. A shriek of pain. Millions of voices, calling out in terror.

Benny pressed 'stop'. There was a deathly silence.

'So what's the plan?' said Bernice at last.

'You know the saying, two heads are better than one?' said Benny.

'Well, there's eight billion of us.'

Bernice strode across the control room, wafting away the oily fumes.

Instruments smouldered and sputtered. At the centre of the bridge, the two Finshargles had been tied up, back to back. Two young men checked the fastenings, then nodded to Benny that all was satisfactory.

Benny clicked her gun into her holster.

'Your plan worked,' said Bernice flatly.

Benny surveyed the dashboard, prodding buttons and squinting at dials. 'It seems to be in working order. I'll pilot the ship back to Dellah. Then the authorities can deal with them.' She pointed a thumb at the Finshargles.

'What about the other soc-reels?' asked Bernice. The cabinet beside her contained hundreds of cassettes, stacked in shelves, each with handwritten labels. 'What's going to happen to all of them?'

‘They’ll be placed into specially-created VR environments. The people will go on living their lives, albeit within a computer. It’s the most humane solution we could come up with.’ Benny ran her fingers through her untidy hair. ‘They’ll never realise it’s all a simulation.

That’s the plan, anyway,’ she added doubtfully.

‘You’re leaving?’

Benny nodded, putting on a smile. ‘But before then, I have one last thing to do.’ She took the cassette from her jacket and slotted it into the induction recorder. ‘It’s time everyone got their own minds back.’

Bernice approached her. ‘You’re putting all the people’s consciousnesses back into their own heads?’

‘Starting now.’ Benny clicked on the main button. The machine began to hum. Above the humming, there were occasional fragments of voices. Gasps of excitement. Yelps of laughter. ‘It’ll take about forty-five minutes to work through them all.’ She turned down the volume. ‘They’ll wake up with no memory of this morning’s events.’

‘I expect they’ll put it down to mass amnesia or something.’

‘Or something, yes.’ Benny regarded her abstractly, hesitating as though she was about to make an apology.

Bernice realised what Benny was unable to say. ‘That means me too, doesn’t it? *I’ll* be replaced by whoever I was... before.’

‘Yes,’ Benny admitted.

‘What if I don’t want to go back? I’m *me*. I’m as much Bernice Summerfield as you are.’

‘You’re a copy.’ Benny shrugged. ‘I’m the *original*.’

‘But I’m just like you, in every way. Everyone on the planet, we’ve all *lived* this morning. We deserve to have the choice.’

‘The people on the tape deserve to have their own lives back.’

‘You’ll be killing us!’

‘That’s my prerogative. If anyone is allowed to decide whether Bernice Summerfield lives or dies, well, it’s me.’

Bernice shook her head, tears forcing their way into her eyes. ‘I want to be *me*. You. Whatever! I don’t want to be erased. I’ll *die*.’ She burst into anger. ‘What you’re doing, it’s no better than the Finshargles! Eight billion lives, *deleted*, just so you can put things back to how they were.’

‘Listen,’ said Benny after some consideration. ‘You’re me. What would you do, if you were in my shoes?’

‘I don’t know.’ Bernice wiped her eyes. ‘I’d probably do the same. But that’s not the point...’

‘And if I was in your shoes,’ Benny replied, ‘I’d do exactly the same things as you. But when this machine has run through the tape, I’ll be the only one of us left.’ Her gaze drifted to the instruments. ‘It’ll be reaching you in the next few seconds.’ She extended a hand.

‘Goodbye.’

‘Goodbye.’ Bernice shook her hand. ‘It was nice... being you.’

‘It was nice knowing me too,’ smiled Benny regretfully. ‘It’s probably arrogant to say so, but I rather like you. Me. Whoever.’ She laughed, then said in a serious, movie-trailer drawl, ‘Professor Bernice Summerfield crossed the galaxy and found... herself.’

Bernice laughed too, the tears clearing.

‘But,’ said Benny, ‘this universe ain’t big enough for the both of us.

There’s only one Bernice Summerfield.’ She pointed to herself. ‘This one.’

Bernice Summerfield smiled at Benny, and then she wasn’t Bernice Summerfield any more.

18: Might

By Neil Corry

Even the roar of an arriving ship – and, boy, one that sounded *massive* – had barely delayed a highly productive meeting. Smiling happily, Bernice set out for a bar. She had time to kill and had decided that she deserved a large congratulatory drink.

It was twenty minutes after Bernice had sat down in the Kintabi equivalent of a café, still quietly congratulating herself, that she remembered the Kintabi lack of curiosity. Even a few centuries of contact with a plethora of alien species hadn't instilled a thimbleful of interest in this quiet and beguiling people. It wasn't as if they went out of their way to be rude, they simply didn't care about anything that wasn't directly affecting them at any particular moment. How they'd created a stable (if a little dull) civilisation was beyond even the very best of archaeologists. They had no history to speak of, nothing had been written down, there was no written language and surprisingly, considering the development of other cultures that hadn't even discovered scrawling on a rock with another different-coloured rock, no oral tradition. And ruins? They just didn't do them.

What made them more infuriating was that they were supremely calm, which made Bernice wonder whether the lack of a burden of a past was what allowed them to face the future with an unrivalled equanimity. But surely the past was the foundation for building a future?

Anyway, to a human's sensibilities, especially to one newly arrived on their world, the tall, slender Kintabi seemed impossibly arrogant (and surprisingly naked, you're trying not to remember they don't do clothes in this dry and dusty climate, Bernice). To an adventuress, mother and Lady of the Universe such as Bernice Summerfield, they were a bugger to get a beer out of. Kintabi waiters just didn't have the mental processes even to wonder whether she would like a drink.

Her eventual and hard-won beer was large, light, fizzy, freezing and absolutely the most perfect example of its kind that had passed her lips for, ooh, hours. That was quickly followed by a sudden sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach as she heard a huge crash and raised voices in what could only be the beginnings of a Babel-esque row.

On a world where the indigenous inhabitants didn't ask *any* questions, it didn't take long for off-worlders to take advantage of this fortunate quirk in Kintabi nature. As a hideout, it was really second to none, although the presence of a large number of the law-resistant did

upset any potential tourist business rather severely. But as deflator of arch-villains and their overblown plans for universal domination, pricker of the foulest of foul fiend's bubbles, the shadier side of human civilisation held few worries for Bernice. And then she heard, quite distinctly through the raised voices, a strong male voice say with a growling sibilance, 'I'm looking for Bernice Ssummerfield. Have you sseen her?'

Okay, so the shadier side of *any* civilisation held few worries for Bernice Summerfield *until* it started to look for her – especially on a planet where no questions were asked. It was a nasty place to disappear.

With a second and, oddly, not quite as tasty gulp of her beer, Bernice decided that no matter how curious she was to discover the identity of her pursuer, her shuttle was suddenly far more interesting and would soon be leaving the planet.

She had the headdress, her job for Brax was done and it was most definitely time to go home.

'Joseph,' she said quietly into her shuttle's communicator tucked into her lapel, 'we're getting out of here.'

Bernice tried not to worry when she didn't get any other reply than the horrible hiss of static. She didn't do very well.

The spaceport was just a cleared area of about two square kilometres.

Technology wasn't rife on Kintabi and landing near the town without the aid of space traffic control meant it was an adventure all of its own.

Significantly less fun was arriving back to your parking space and seeing your tiny shuttle approaching two dimensions because it was being flattened by a massive Neo-Aretian Destroyer.

'Oh no,' she whispered. 'Joseph...'

'Yes, Bernice?'

She almost jumped out of her skin as her portable porter, a floating football-sized sphere, rose to eye level.

'Aaaargh!' she shouted, raising her arms in what she could only describe as mixture of shock, relief and anger. 'I thought you were in there!'

The white ball did a half-turn as if looking at the now-defunct shuttle but said nothing.

'How did you get out?'

'I activated the doors and evacuated the ship.'

If Joseph was being sarcastic, Bernice couldn't tell. Pointing to the ridiculously but scarily huge ship, she cried, 'And you never thought to let me know, or alert the pilots of that bloody great ship to mind their step?'

‘I had anticipated that the ship’s owners would realise what they were about to land on. They are deeply apologetic and –’

Joseph’s explanation was cut short as the air between the robotic porter and its owner suddenly turned a vivid shade of green. Taking a few hurried steps backwards, Bernice could have sworn the air *wibbled* as a slightly grizzled-looking man in black overalls stepped out, pointing a weapon that seemed to be part of his right arm straight at her. He looked shocked at seeing Bernice.

‘Bloody hell! You’re here!’

Lowering his weapon, he barked, ‘Stand down, Joseph,’ without turning to him. He smiled apologetically.

‘Mum, we’ve got to get you out of here.’

It’s well known that Bernice Summerfield has never been the sort of person to be taken unawares and that no one will ever have the drop on her. Okay, nine times out of ten, that’s true. Or maybe eight. Well, at least not without a sharp-tongued yet witty retort from someone who knows how to deal with that little-known step that follows jumping from the frying pan into the fire.

It was being called ‘Mum’ that had stunned her. With Peter’s arrival she had wondered what it was going to sound like, her child calling after her. Like, ‘I love you, Mum.’ Even whingy: ‘Mum! I want a biscuit!’ Even the ‘Muuuummmm... you know where babies (particularly furry ones with a slight bark and sharp teeth) come from...?’ conversation had been played out in her mind. But being called ‘Mum’ was still months away and so why was an armed (but fairly attractive, now she came to think of it) man in his mid-twenties who was almost dragging her in his haste to be away from the spaceport calling *her* ‘Mum’?

She pulled away from his arm and stood still, with Joseph stopping by her right ear. ‘Hold it!’

The man paid her no attention. He was looking at a hand-held computer’s display.

‘We don’t have time for this, Mum,’ he called back, still running.

But then he stopped and turned to her. ‘Actually, okay, we’ve got about twelve minutes and thirty-eight seconds.’

Suddenly there was something in his eyes, something Bernice thought she recognised. He sighed and pressed the display.

‘Who –’ began Bernice.

‘– are you?’ came her own voice back at her from the man’s computer. ‘Where do you think you’re taking me? Did you have anything to do with the ship landing on the shuttle?’

The man smiled, pressed another display and a small black card slipped out of the computer’s side.

‘That’s a bit of a temporal paradox, having a recording of what you were going to say *before* you said it without you actually saying it.’ He shrugged and snapped the card in two and threw it to the ground. ‘Just as long as you-know-who aren’t watching,’ he said, pointing to the sky, ‘I don’t think we should worry about it too much.’

Without another word, he grabbed her arm and set off at a run. It wasn’t her voice coming from the machine that allowed her to be hauled along. It wasn’t the mention of ‘you-know who’ and temporal paradoxes that kept her in a half-daze as they raced towards a series of caves. It was his infuriating half-smile as he had played the impossible recording. She had a horrifying certainty of who this handsome kidnapper was.

He hadn’t been running blind and was certain of his destination.

They’d run into a rock-strewn cave that smelled cool and damp after the afternoon’s dry heat.

‘It’s got to be down here somewhere,’ the man mumbled to himself, gently smacking the display of his hand-held. ‘Why can’t this thing find it?’

Then the cave was filled with the same green colour that had preceded the man’s arrival.

‘Mum!’ he shouted, pulling his gun into position and simultaneously slamming Bernice on to the hard ground. Joseph landed with a *thunk* by her side and bleeped unhappily.

‘I have had enough of this!’ she hissed as the green faded away. The air *wibbled* again and a waist-high black block appeared. ‘You tell me what’s going on *right now* or I’m out of here!’

‘Two minutes, I promise,’ said her captor, racing up to the block, punching a control that made lights all over the box come alive. He shook off the gun from his arm and placed it on the ground. With his freed hand he scratched his head while making what Bernice guessed were some kind of adjustments. ‘We’re early. I’m not sure if this is a good thing or a bad thing.’

‘I’ll tell you what’d be a good thing –’

He turned, held out an arm and helped Bernice to her feet. ‘You have to come closer to the deflector. Its range isn’t good, but it should be enough.’

Dusting herself down, she couldn’t help asking, ‘What’s it going to deflect?’

‘Us,’ came the simple reply with that same lopsided smile. ‘Now, I suppose you want to know what the cruk is going on?’

Bernice held his stare for a moment. His eyes sent a shiver down her spine. He noticed her discomfort and frowned. ‘Or do you want to guess?’ There was a breath-holding pause, only the gentle hum from

Joseph (and a lot of use he'd been so far) and the activated block made any sound.

'You're Keith.'

And he smiled. And she *knew*.

It was centuries ago that Bernice had discovered that her father hadn't deserted Spacefleet, but was actually holed up in a tiny English village, somehow impossibly living at the end of the twentieth century.

Trapped there too had been a ghost in torment, messing about with time. It had shown her and Jason a tantalising and so-solid vision of the future: their child. Keith Brannigan Kane-Summerfield. A toddler, not even talking, just stumbling around and getting his too-cute blue dungarees dirty at the knees. And later, discovering Keith had vanished as strangely as he'd arrived had *hurt* so much, but those feelings were pushed down as she and her friends saved the world once again.

For a while the knowledge that Keith would happen had buoyed their relationship. There was an unsaid hope every time she and Jason made love that Keith might be the end result. That all changed when the potential parents split up and the chances of Keith becoming a certainty became increasingly remote. Bernice looked into the man's eyes, finding bits of Jason here and there, around the chin, the scruffy hair, but it was his eyes. Keith had her father's eyes.

'This isn't a sick joke,' Keith said quietly, turning slightly from Bernice's strong gaze. 'I'm not some sort of clone, or anything like that. And I know this is going to be tough, but I'm still a potential.'

'A potential what?'

'A potential *Keith*,' he laughed. 'I might happen, I might not.'

Bernice waved her hand to stop him and shook her head. 'Then how can you be here? Surely time travel doesn't work like that? It never has in my experience:

He raised his eyes to the cave ceiling. His mannerisms were so Jason. 'Shouldn't what happened in Little Caldwell make you revise that opinion? I don't understand the science of it, though. For once, I'm just doing what I'm told. Just understand this: if you'd got on that ship with those Warriors, you'd never have made it home to the Collection and I could never happen.'

'They've just squashed my shuttle –'

– and were about to offer you a lift home. You know the argument you heard in town? They were looking for you to apologise. The pilot's in serious trouble with the captain, let me tell you.'

In spite of herself, in spite of the fact that there was a lot to take in, Bernice laughed and then stopped short.

'That doesn't explain why you're here.'

'Where's the headdress?'

Bernice patted the pockets of her jacket that felt too light but, looking across the floor, she saw the sawdust-coloured head-wrap almost camouflaged against the sandy cave floor close to the entrance.

Without thinking, she strode over and picked it up.

'Mum! No! They'll be able to lock in on us!'

The look on his face was of abject terror but he wasn't looking at her, he was gazing over her shoulder. Twisting around, she saw the air turn green and when the world went *wibble* it didn't sound funny any more.

The creatures that emerged were disgusting. Their appearance was the equal of the stench they brought with them, both making Bernice retch and feel dizzy. She'd met thousands of species and prided herself that she never judged a book by its cover but the four figures sliming their way towards her made her stomach do Olympic-standard somersaults. They reminded her of six-foot-tall half-masticated kebabs with extra chilli sauce. Their deep brown skin hung in irregular folds all along their bodies, with a dark-red fluid oozing from massive pores. Every time one moved, it *squelched*. She couldn't see anything that would pass for eyes, or any sensory organs for that matter

'Hello,' she said, putting forward a hand but quickly retracting it.

'I'm Professo-'

The creature closest to her hissed angrily, 'Silence, pathetic human. You are prisoners of the mighty Nimmari Intersection. You will surrender the Imaging -'

'Mum! Down!'

In the corner of her eye Bernice saw her would-be son dive to the ground, reach for his weapon and slip it over his arm in one graceful movement. As he brought it to bear on the new arrivals, Bernice fell backwards but the combination of treading on some alien slime and the disorientation caused by their massive stench meant that as she tried to balance herself, she cracked her head on the cave wall.

Suddenly the world turned white...

'Mum, I know you're awake. Your nose is wrinkling from the smell.'

Bernice blinked her eyes open while her barely conscious thoughts wrestled with each other. What were those creatures? Why was Keith interested in the headdress? Why had he come back through time?

Why was Joseph being no use at all? How did the creatures stink *that* badly?

'Urkle.'

'Mum, you've barely been out for a minute. But we've got to get out of here, and sharpish.'

The stench was even worse than before but it now had a cooked quality to it. Sitting herself up and clutching her pounding head, Bernice saw that the Nimmari had each been neatly sliced in two.

Obviously Keith's handiwork.

Keith helped her to her feet. Bernice couldn't help noticing that he looked frightened. 'It's the headdress, isn't it? That's what they – and you – are after. You have to tell me what's so special about it.'

'Fine, but not now. We have to move. They'll have our position, will doubtless know their scout party is so much dog food and will be heading straight here.'

He tried to take the headdress out of her hand, but instinctively Bernice pulled back and was surprised that it didn't rip.

'I can't let you do that.'

'Mum –'

'Do not "Mum" me. I'm sorry, but I've been caught like this before. Someone lulls me into a false sense of security and all too quickly betrays my easily misplaced trust. Either you tell me what we're fighting over here or we're staying put until more of those slimeballs appear.'

She held his gaze for mere seconds but could see a resolve as strong as hers, a stubbornness that she had inherited from her father and would pass on.

He blinked first.

'Okay, okay,' he said, letting go, allowing Bernice to stuff the cloth into a pocket. 'This is going to have to be short. We've already changed history so maybe we have a minute or two.' He paused, gathering his thoughts. 'You think the Kintabi have always been the indifferent people you know now, right? Wrong. What you don't know, and I'm not telling you *how* I know, is that they have no technology of their own because they destroyed it. Almost every single scrap of it. They were horrific abusers of the power they had, spreading across the galaxy like a swarm of locusts. Then they met a species – don't ask who – that had the same power. For them, it was like looking in a mirror. Revolted by what they saw, having seen that their absolute power had absolutely corrupted them, they retreated into themselves. They changed not the just the way they think but their DNA structure, so that they would never be interested in learning about that power. You think that headdress should be preserved but it really should never have survived –'

Bernice was impressed by his passion. It sounded vaguely familiar, but she had to interrupt.

'It should never have survived because it holds, in fact, the designs for the most monstrous weapon ever seen in the galaxy?'

That half-smile again. 'Almost got it in one, Mum.'

‘I had the sneaky impression that it would be.’

‘I said “almost”. It has a marvellous sub-atomic structure. It leads to a revolutionary new science, and *that* will lead to a horrific war. You can’t take it back to Brax because... someone will steal it and you’ll never see it again until it’s way too late.’

Bernice didn’t like the way he paused before saying ‘someone’ because that made it sound as if she knew that ‘someone’. She didn’t follow that line of thought. ‘Are you sure it’s not just an antique headscarf? And how can I know that you’re one of the good guys?’

He handed a small scrap of paper and Bernice couldn’t help but recognise the handwriting.

Keith Brannigan Kane-Summerfield is the child of a human being, and we know that he will be capable of being cruel and cowardly. But, though he may get caught up in violent events, his parents will teach him to be a man of peace.

Bernice screwed it up in her hands, looking angrily at Keith. ‘Oh, that’s good, that’s very –’

Keith rushed forward, snatched the headdress from her pocket and pushed Bernice to the ground.

‘You little –’

Wibble

Lying on the cave floor, she realised that Keith had inadvertently saved her life. Four disgusting Nimmari had appeared and it would’ve been her instead of Keith who took four simultaneous blasts from four stubby silver rods held by four glistening and revolting limbs. For a moment, the world flickered between black and white and when her vision returned to normal, she saw a charred body lying in front of the computer block with its flickering lights.

She couldn’t move. Didn’t think. Didn’t hear the orders hissed at her. She couldn’t take her eyes off the blackened corpse. The headdress was still in his hand, but as she stared she saw it begin to disintegrate. She didn’t feel a thing. This was worse than numb. She just wasn’t there any more.

If she hadn’t been lying on the ground then the sonic boom that followed the Nimmari attack would have knocked her down. The four stinking Nimmari at the mouth of the cave were ripped apart, their disgusting flesh flying across the cave, landing everywhere. Lifting her head and rubbing her eyes clean of the alien remains, Bernice saw a squad of green-armoured Neo-Aretian soldiers pointing their sonic guns in her general direction.

Joseph bobbed in the air beside her, turning this way and that.

‘Bernice? Bernice? Can you stand?’

Bernice fell back on the ground and just stared at the ceiling. Even

when one of the soldiers gently lifted her off the cave floor, the direction of her gaze never altered. It was if she didn't know where to look and no matter how much they tried to persuade her, she wouldn't release the screwed-up piece of paper held tight in her fist.

Bernice Summedield's diary: some time later:

I'm dictating this because I really don't trust myself to write it down.

Anyway, here goes.

The crew of the Bruk VII didn't know what to do with me but then I didn't know what to do with me. Arriving after the nick of time like that... Joseph had been in almost constant contact with them after they'd landed on the shuttle and had acted as a homing beacon while... Keith and I argued about a damn piece of cloth. I wanted to be grateful for them saving my life but I was in no state to do anything, least of all feel grateful.

I don't claim to understand temporal physics. If what Keith said is true then there's a huge paradox that will probably unravel the universe at some point. I have it from a reliable source that they can do that, like pulling a single thread from a favourite pullover and ending up with a messy pile of wool on the floor.

Those who do understand temporal physics, like my reliable source, can sort that one out. Not my field.

I started to wonder whether Keith came from a universe where Jason and I had stayed together. I've seen all sorts of potential futures, altered pasts, parallel universes, and so that might be the case. So why doesn't it feel like that? I worried more about whether the future was now safe. The only answer to that I could think of is: is anything ever safe?

I don't know if Keith was the real deal or was just using a woman's memories of a child she had hoped for in order to steal some kind of superweapon. That slip of paper had convinced me that he wasn't my future child. It was too clumsy, like emotional blackmail, something I don't respond well to.

He would've known that. Wouldn't he?

When he died... right there, right there in front of me... maybe I was thinking of how I'd feel if anything happened to Peter, the child that I do know –

after everything – is mine.

Or maybe I wasn't thinking that at all.

19: Paydirt

By Lance Parkin

The ultrasonic trowel loosened another handful of soil, sifted it, then moved it gently to one side. The image recognition software would identify anything valuable it found, the dating subroutines would identify the era it was from. But archaeology students were still meant to use their own eyes and their own brains, not rely on the infinitely more sensitive and educated computers.

Stev Grayson had very little to do.

Another handful of soil shimmered and parted. The ground here was soft, organically rich. In terms of finds, though, all the action was on the south side of the site, over where they'd located the ruins of the computer core. The processors were all either smashed or robbed out, but some of the memory chips were coming up intact, and N-v23 was leading a team cleaning them up, prepping them to see if the data had survived.

The wall of the computer vault had been liquefied. At least that was the best guess anyone could make as to why there was a congealed patch of steel there. That had excited a lot of interest. It was evidence of attack, and a rather exotic attack at that.

No power casings had been discovered, no skeletons, not even liquefied ones. But they'd found evidence that there had been surveillance cameras; just the mounts and courses for cables, the cameras and cables themselves had gone. Reused elsewhere, probably, or removed and smashed by the attackers. But there should be two memory cores with actual pictures of the attack. The primary security system had probably been found by the aliens and destroyed, but the back-up was always harder to find. Anyone on the south side might find it.

Here, to the east, was the ornamental garden.

And no one ever put a computer core in an ornamental garden.

You put plant pots (fifteen distinct examples of pottery, all using clays imported from other worlds, but which were mass produced and of little interest), decorative walls (local brick, machine made), and ponds (none discovered, a strong hint from the geophysics of a large fishpond, possibly with some defensive function, fifty metres to the west) in an ornamental garden.

Grayson paused. Something was glinting in the soil. It wasn't metal, or the trowel would have registered it.

Plastic. An inch-long crescent of gold plastic poking from the

ground.

Grayson used a delicate setting on the trowel to dust the earth away.

‘Professor!’ he called out. ‘Professor!’

The Professor was thirty metres away, and didn’t come straight over. Grayson was alone with the artefact for a full minute, which he filled with a dozen theories about it.

‘So what do you think it is?’ the Professor asked, in that sardonic tone of hers. She looked like everyone’s favourite Gran, down to the white bun and sensible grey kaftan, but there was acid in her blood.

Grayson smiled, biding his time. ‘I think it’s important.’

The Professor looked down at him, the eyebrow still raised. ‘Go on.’

‘It’s seven inches down, I found it next to a piece of ceramic we know is from the early twenty-seventh century.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning it’s nearly two thousand years old.’ He paused, ‘And this could be an earring worn by Bernice Surprise Summerfield herself.’

Grayson held it up to the green sunlight.

‘The real Bernice Summerfield died in the catacombs of the cathedral on Vremnya on October Thirty-First 2599, everyone knows that.’

‘Do they indeed?’

Gould pressed her point. ‘Her tomb’s there. With an inscription.’

Professor Kent laughed. ‘There’s another tomb on Mars, and another in the Kalkravian asteroid belt.’

Four of them were sitting out on the grass, drinking coffee and staring down at the earring, which had its own cushion.

‘It’s not got any DNA traces on it,’ N-v23 told them. His speciality was clonodating. taking a speck of blood or bone marrow, then flash-tanking a clone, and just asking it who it was. The clones weren’t real clones, of course, and only tended to live an hour or two. It was real cutting edge stuff, banned by the Vatican. Not because the Pope had any real ethical objections (how could he, having himself been grown from one of St Peter’s fingernails?), but because he’d caught N-v23 trying to steal the Turin Shroud.

‘It’s a mass-produced item,’ Grayson objected. ‘Surely anything worn by Bernice Summerfield herself would be more high status?’

‘The salaries of archaeologists were about the same, in real terms, in the twenty-sixth century as they are now,’ said the Professor, sighing.

‘But she went on to become the Supreme Commander of all human space.’

‘...without ever once appearing in the list of Empresses,’ Gould said sulkily. ‘Although she did manage to fight vampires in the twentieth century, stand alongside the Cathars in the twelfth, and get married in

2010. And there are dozens of pictures of her, and the only thing any of them have in common is that they hardly look anything like each other.'

Gould passed round her laptop. She'd done something to it that meant it was flashing up pictures of 'Bernice Summerfield', one every few seconds. Almost all of them were women with short dark hair. In most she was wearing hoop earrings, like the one sitting on the cushion. But, after that... well, she was tall, she was short, she had a round face, a sharply pointed chin, her hands were large, they were tiny, she was flat-chested, had an ample bosom, she looked anaemic, she was coffee-skinned, her body was almost androgynous, it was curvy and sensuous, she had a long nose and a tiny bump.

'All Bernice Summerfield,' she said. 'All of them when she was about thirty years old. If you know so much about Bernice Summerfield, then what colour were her eyes?'

'Blue.'

'Brown,' N-v23 asserted.

'Green,' Grayson said, a little uncertainly.

Gould laughed. 'And we all know about her being tortured by the Nazis. So... was her husband with her?'

'Which husband?' the Professor chuckled, 'Jason Kane or the -?'

'Precisely my point. There's one story that says she had thirteen half-immortal children by the last survivor of a race of time travellers. Leaving aside precisely what "half-immortality" is, you most all be able to see how ridiculous that sounds? So go on - how tall was she?'

'Ah... imaginary numbers.' N-v23 was in home territory now.

'Imagine a flock of birds overhead. Picture them. A large flock of birds.'

There weren't any birds on this planet, but Grayson did as he was told. He could see them swirling, all the wings beating. The others were doing the same.

'You can imagine that, Gould?'

'Of course I can,' she said irritably. 'I can picture a flock of birds.'

'How many of them are there?' N-v23 asked.

Gould hesitated. 'There's no right answer to that.'

'You can see them. There must be a quantifiable answer.'

'There aren't *any*,' Gould complained. 'You're trying to trick me, but if you want to know how many birds there really are. Well... none.'

The Professor laughed. 'And after millennia of archaeology on Earth, we've still not found Camelot, Robin Hood's body or the Batcave.'

'Well, if you believe every inscription, Professor Bernice Summerfield probably fought alongside King Arthur, just before she was Catwoman.' The Professor smiled. 'She was certainly a remarkable

woman.'

'There's no certainty. That's my point. She's a fairy story. She's not real. And the people that wrote about her couldn't even get some basic facts about her straight.'

'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' the Professor asked.

'Haven't you realised yet that the true measure of immortality isn't in your DNA, or in sticking to your story, or in having your picture painted? Think about the most enduring stories in human culture. The Greek myths, Don Quixote, Shakespeare's plays, even the Bible. The texts we have of those are copied down versions of mistranslation and fragments of things people could remember hearing or reading.'

'So you're saying that all those records of Bernice Summerfield are just stories?' Grayson said, disappointed.

'Of course she is,' said Gould. 'You've read the books, you've heard the recordings, you saw the movie. Do you really think any of that stuff *could* have happened, let alone *did*?'

The Professor turned to Gould. 'Young lady, I'm saying nothing of the sort. Everyone knows there really was a King Arthur, a Robin Hood, a Beowulf, a Jack the Ripper and a Sherlock Holmes. The people who inspired their stories must have been formidable. Giants. And what do you mean *just* stories? Don't you understand? Every story, wherever it appears, whatever form it takes, even whatever happens in it... it all adds up. They stand on each other's shoulders, and they can't be contained by mere *facts*.'

Gould snorted at that and decided to get up. N-v23 also looked a little unhappy and extended his wheels before chugging away.

Soon it was just Grayson and the Professor.

Grayson chuckled.

The Professor smiled at Grayson, then picked up the earring and slipped it into her pocket. 'What are you laughing at?'

'If the real Bernice Summerfield could see us here, discussing her, not being able to come to any conclusions, she'd love it, don't you think? Dead and buried for two thousand years, but having fellow archaeologists deciding she was immortal, and one of the greatest human beings who'd ever lived. She'd have raised her glass and laughed her head off.'

'Oh... I'm certain of it.' The Professor held up her coffee mug and winked at him. 'Cheers.'

Grayson had never noticed the Professor's eyes before that moment. He hadn't noticed how blue they were. No... brown.

Or was it green?

20: Dear Friend...

By Jim Sangster

Note: this manuscript was found floating in space in an empty bottle of Mif's Ruin, a Chelonian spirit that is extremely dangerous for humanoids to consume, but has nevertheless found a following in the harder bars of the spiral arms. Mif's Ruin leaves a telltale burnt-in meniscus mark when the bottle is re-sealed following consumption. This particular bottle appears to either have been completely emptied into another container, or 'downed in one'.

Dear Friend,

As I approach forty for what feels like the second time (such is the nature of time travel, as you, of all people, should know), I find myself prone to periods of reminiscence and nostalgia. You're thinking 'those are fuelled by the copious amounts of vodka she's been drinking'.

Except that I haven't touched a drop for a long time.

Don't act so surprised.

Sobriety is strange. It's like a relative who was always there at weddings and funerals, but who one never actually spoke to. I was always suspicious of anyone who advocated a life of abstinence. Even you joined me in the odd tipples. But after recent events – more of which later – I was forced to make that big leap towards giving up the demon drink. By the Goddess it's been hard. At first I did the whole martyr thing: made sure everyone knew I was being a good girl and bored the legs off anyone who'd listen with updates on how good I'd been. Then came the need to moan about it: how I hated being good, resented being made to behave responsibly. Damn it, I wanted a drink!

More, I wanted to be drunk. One hundred per cent loud and tactless drunk. Loss of memory drunk.

Damn. Just found myself thinking that again. I imagine I'll never get over that.

So, anyway, reminiscence. There have been many occasions since we first met when I've said to myself: 'Professor,' (I can be quite formal with myself, let's face it, who else is?) 'how has your life changed since that last day on Heaven?' I thought time travel would be fun. Being an archaeologist I'd be able to see the past before it got all messy. I'd see history while it was alive. But I didn't reckon on something else, something fairly obvious really: alive means it can bite your arm off. I've been shot at, infected, tortured countless times,

chased, hunted, caught, freed, killed – at least twice – but still haven't been successfully cursed, mind you, all in the name of adventure.

Archaeology is like meeting an old man with a kind face and then letting him tell you about his days as an executioner. I discovered that it was the distance, the persuasion, the slow process of revealing the facts that actually appealed to me. Popping back to check out the truth for myself now smacks of not playing fair.

What am I saying? Like you ever played fair.

It's not as if I'm even sure what my own past means any more. I live in a time that's so very slightly completely unlike my own. I still get a kick out of seeing people's faces when they try to equate my birthdate with the late-thirty-something woman standing before them. But my own memories are messed up too. I remember being on Earth during their Second World War, but I can't remember whether you were with me or if I was just hoping you were.

That's you doing that, isn't it? Editing the universe, as always? I hope it is, anyway.

I was asked to write my memoirs. I went way past the deadline, so I cheated. I got some of my students and (can I write this without giggling?) fans (nope!) to write it for me. What was strange was not so much how they saw me, but how often their reportage was at odds with my own memories. It got me wondering about all those differing realities: are they really all me? And if so, are they me at the same time, or do I just slip in and out of each one? Am I me now?

Bugged if I know. I like me, though. Splendid girls, all of them.

When we travelled together, we ran into many old 'friends' of yours. Big on Freudian over-compensation and personal advancement, small on ethics and personal hygiene. But it seems ages since I heard your name, or met anyone who's heard of you.

I still think that I'll see you again one day, maybe when I'm old and trying to decide what colour to dye my hair. So, just in case, I thought I'd let you know my news. As of last week, I'm a mummy.

I know. It came as a surprise to me too.

I won't go into exactly how this happened, except to say it was not the usual way, but the usual madness I've come to expect since I met you. I'm not sure if it's fair to blame you. I mean, as far as any of this is certain, I'm sure you're not the father –

Yes, I am sure.

But if I hadn't decided to leave Heaven and go with you, if I hadn't then left, married, divorced and settled here with Braxiatel and his collection, I suppose I wouldn't have been where I was when... well, when my little bundle of joy was conceived. So I owe you a massive thank you.

You once told me that if I ever needed to get in touch, all I had to

do was put a letter into a bottle and throw it out into space. Well, here you go. I'm going to pop this into the first vacuum-proof bottle I can find and hope for the best.

Thanks for being the best friend a woman ever had.

Afterword

By Lloyd Rose

Benny – Bernice Surprise Summerfield – enters laughing. When we first see her, in Paul Cornell's *Love and War*, she wakes up and proceeds to 'laugh her head off'. Maybe she's been dreaming about her improbable future: the Seventh Doctor's most popular companion, the Eighth's first snug, and finally a star first of her own series of novels and then a line of audios.

And why shouldn't she have laughed? After all, who normally cares about the hero's sidekick? More to the point, who wants to *read* about the hero's sidekick? At least, in a book in which the sidekick replaces the hero. We like Watson, to be sure. Watson is a stout fellow.

Reliable, goodhearted, a pillar of integrity and not averse to lugging his ex-service revolver into situations that might call for one. Also possessed of a pawky vein of humour. But do we want Watson without Holmes? Much as we like him, no. No more than we want Archie Goodwin without NeroWolf or the Cowardly Lion without Dorothy. (I was about to say, 'Or Jeeves without Bertie,' but I'm afraid that may be an exception: it can be argued that, in a perfect world, Jeeves might actually be *preferable* without Berne. But then, there's some legitimate confusion as to which of the Bertie-Jeeves pairing is the companion and which the hero.)

So, what about Benny?

What's her secret?

There are certain problems intrinsic to the creation of a *Doctor Who* companion. What's she or he for? The question is more complicated than it appears. With the character who became known as the First Doctor, played by William Hartnell, it was necessary to give the audience a 'way in' to this odd, time-travelling reality. But it was also necessary to distance the Doctor, putting him behind the shield of a couple of ordinary people so that he could be mysterious and, if necessary, even a little frightening. Granddaughter Susan provided the connection for the target audience of children, and Ian provided the young-man muscle necessary to back up the elderly Doctor's purely cerebral skills. It's hard to say exactly what Barbara was supposed to contribute, but adding her meant that on one level the program worked as a family drama about a Mum, a Dad, a kid and a very weird grandfather: 'What's he up to now? Oh no!' (For another mid-sixties variation on this theme, see *A Hard Day's Night*.) Later on, the ride became that the Doctor travelled with attractive females. Companions

such as Peri were created and cast in part to provide ‘something for the Dads’. Most of them, even the Time Ladies, tended to panic and get in trouble a lot.

This was mainly to keep the plot moving. In order for a melodrama to chug along satisfactorily, one of the characters has to keep making mistakes. Clearly it can’t be the hero. And it can’t be the villain, or the audience will feel he’s no threat. It falls to the poor companion to push the wrong button, wander down the wrong hallway, open the wrong hatch and generally make the writer’s life easier by allowing him not to have to tax his brain by coming up with some less lazy and more interesting way to complicate the plot.

And this remained pretty much the case until just before the series ended, when the obstreperous teenager Ace came on board as companion to the Seventh Doctor. Their relationship, part father-daughter and part, because of McCoy and Aldred’s on-screen chemistry, something else, was complicated and often troubled. This was the Doctor-companion pairing the writers of Virgin’s *New Adventures* inherited.

The *New Adventures* authors recreated the Seventh Doctor, taking ideas suggested by script editor Andrew Cartmel and explored in McCoy’s performance to their full conclusion. This small, psychically wounded, morally divided creature, with a Scots elder’s righteous wrath and a boy’s tender conscience, existed on a whole different level of psychological and literary complexity from his television predecessor. This put a new kind of pressure on the role of companion.

A morally ambiguous Doctor called for a morally ambivalent companion. Ace wasn’t quite up to this. She was strong, but rigid: moralistic, judgmental, self-righteous (and frequently, to put it baldly, a pain). There were only a few things a writer could do with her, most of these involving:

- a) disappointment with the Doctor and
- b) rage.

Benny was the first companion who was not simply a prose version of an actor-developed television role. She was created specifically for the novels, with a novel’s greater possibilities for depth of characterisation in mind, and, fortunately, handled by writers who could take advantage of these possibilities.

Benny was, and is, fundamentally sane, which helps if you’re travelling with a Doctor who is frequently on the edge of a nervous breakdown and a teenager drifting towards the psychopathic. She was a party animal of whom the Doctor could say (in Ben Aaronovitch’s *The Also People*) that she was revered on at least two planets as a goddess of indiscriminate drinking. She was also insecure enough to

fake her academic credentials, emotional enough still to ache from her first romantic betrayal, sufficiently moral to regard the Doctor's actions sceptically, and straightforward enough to tell him what she thought of him (most memorably in the outburst, 'Git! Git! Git!') Plus she had a sense of humour.

In short, Benny was an adult introduced into a book series based on a children's television show. With her detachment and perspective, the ability to appreciate others' needs and acknowledge different points of view, she grounded what could simply have spun off into a helter-skelter fantasy-adventure series. She rescued the books' ideas from abstraction, guaranteeing them a human reaction. And she brought a rueful depth of experience to adventures populated with various idealists and fanatics. Benny became an ex-companion with the death and regeneration of the Seventh Doctor, who had become for her almost a second father. However, she said her farewell by pouncing lustily on his only recently regenerated, handsome Eighth self (at which point Lance Parkin, who set up the incident in *The Dying Days*, tactfully drew the curtain, inspiring much delighted fan speculation as to how far the encounter went).

Off on her own, she has starred in novels inspired by panto, books that turned the *Who* niverse inside-out, adventures that were larks, adventures that were serious, adventures that you weren't sure what they were. Courtesy of Lisa Bowerman, we've heard her voice in the Big Finish audios, in conversation with old friends Ace and the Seventh Doctor, as well as new friends, enemies and the occasional monster. Oh, and Iris Wildthyme, bridging all sorts of inter-series gaps. Hers is as varied and rewarding a series as the *Who* novels and audios themselves. We've been alongside Benny as she's lost the world she was based on and returned to the ruins. We've seen that alternative and experimental Bernices can appear and still be somehow her. Her supporting cast has become an irregular and varied mixture of big personalities like Emile, Clarence, and Menlove Stokes. Nobody ever seems to leave forever: these are old friends who are always going to be popping back. Hers is a warm cosmos.

More recently, Bernice has relocated, gained another big chunk of supporting cast, and found some different men in her life: Adrian Wall, even Braxiatel from certain angles, on the right day. Plus, her former husband Jason is back, part of the open, adaptable format that continues to appeal to writers of all inclinations and all generations.

Also, hugely, Bernice has taken the biggest step of all. She's become a mother. It seems to suit her she's been mothering her various Doctors, plus the poor inhabitants of the planets they've stumbled across, for years.

A writer working with another author's character is in some sense

‘acting’ a role. Benny is a role writers enjoy playing. She has style *and* she has depth. She allows opportunities for wit. Her curiosity and her profession as a field archaeologist mean that she’ll go just about anyplace and approach what she finds there with an open mind. A writer never has to wonder what the hell to *do* with her. She’s a rich conception, a gift to the writers who’ve worked with her since Paul Cornell, and an example of the best kind of author’s idea, one that inspires others and invites them to find themselves and their work in her. The generosity implicit in her creation is what accounts for our still reading about her today.

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